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FEATURING

RAIDERS OF THE CENTRAL HILLS

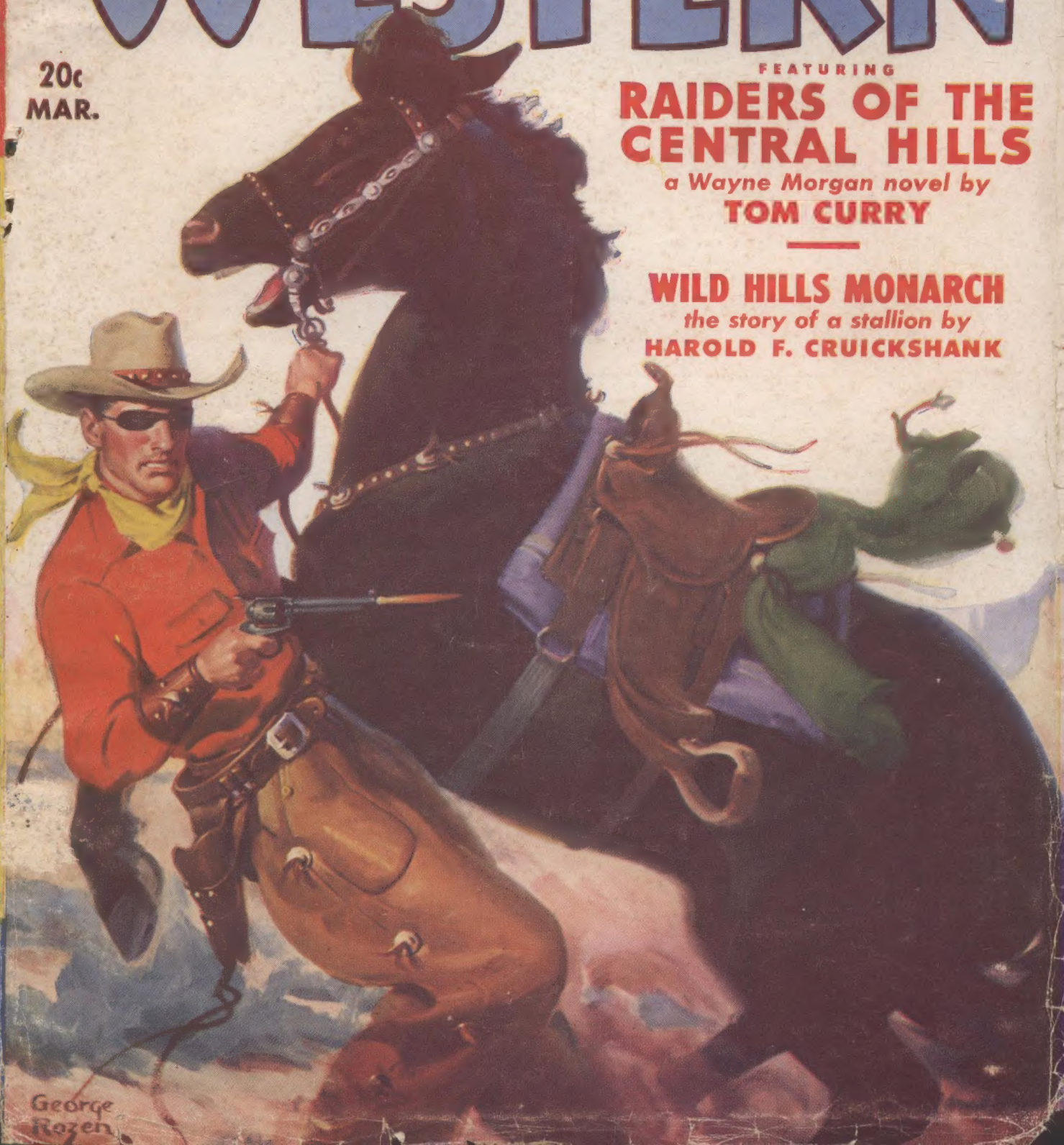
a Wayne Morgan novel by

TOM CURRY

WILD HILLS MONARCH

the story of a stallion by

HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK



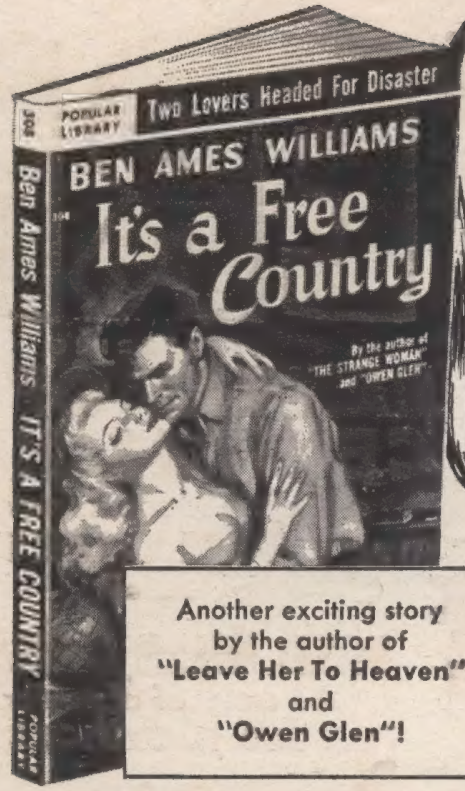
George Rozen

20c

RAIDERS OF THE CENTRAL HILLS
A WAYNE MORGAN NOVEL

MASKED RIDER WESTERN

MAR. 1951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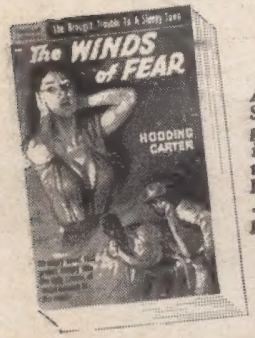

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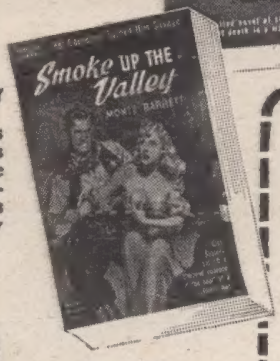

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MASKED RIDER WESTERN

Vol. XXIX, No. 2 A THRILLING PUBLICATION March, 1951

A NEW WAYNE MORGAN NOVEL

Raiders of the Central Hills

By Tom Curry

Arriving too late to save Felton of the Circle F Ranch, the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk remain in the mountain country long enough to protect other pioneers besieged by power-mad hellions! **9**

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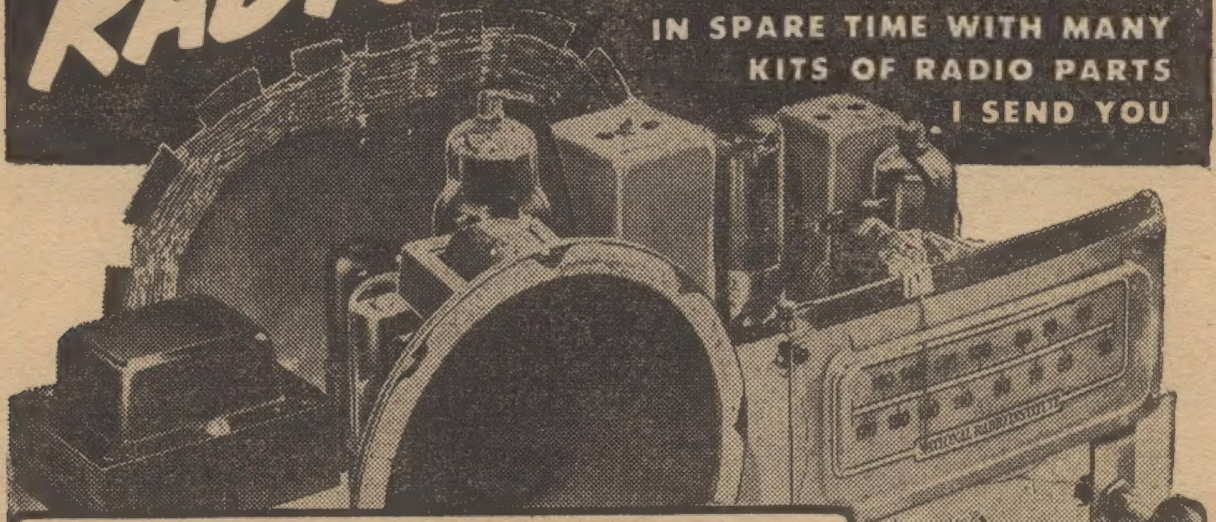

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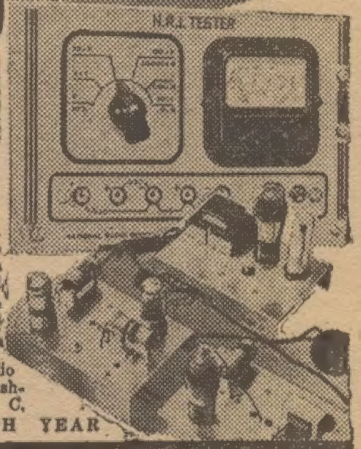

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A Department for Readers Conducted by FOGHORN CLANCY

HI WADDIES, grab yourself a bronc and let's be off on another trail jaunt and another trail talk. On cool mornings if you are going for a horseback ride, after you have saddled your cayuse, it is best to untrack him before mounting, but if you don't know what untracking is, guess we had better enlighten you on the subject. Many a gentle horse may buck on a cool morning if he is not untracked before mounting, which is simply to lead the horse a few feet after he has been saddled before mounting him, lead him out of the original tracks or away from where he was standing when saddled. This has a tendency to keep him from bucking when you have mounted, as if he is very much inclined to buck he will do so when you start to lead him away.

Gentle horses sometimes buck on cool mornings because they are in a playful mood. They don't really intend to hurt anyone, but a fall from a horse is just as hard to take no matter what mood the horse is in.

The Beauty of America

Now that you are all ready and mounted, let's be off down the trails. There is nothing prettier than a wooded, hilly, or mountainous section, where every season of the year has its own loveliness. I sometimes wonder if we fully appreciate America and its wonderful scenery, and I also wonder why Americans go to foreign countries to view the scenery of those countries before they have seen a bit of the wonderful scenery in this great land of ours.

East, west, north, or south, there are hundreds of awesome sights in America, sights the magnitude and grandeur of which make one feel as small as the smallest atom. Often Nature's handiwork is added to by man's ingenuity and mechanical genius, but it is seldom made more beautiful to the eye. U.S. Highway 66, running all the way from Chicago to Santa Monica, California, is a beautiful highway, one over which tourists may speed in their high-powered automobiles in comfort, and it traverses many sections of great scenic beauty.

Highways of Romance

Such highways seem to lack the romance that such old time trails as the Santa Fe Trail held, but the days of the Santa Fe Trail were the days of romance in the then early West. There was tragedy, adventure, danger and romance along the old Santa Fe Trail, but we can thank a great many of those hardy pioneers who traveled west over the Santa Fe Trail and other trails for helping to build a great section of our country so that we can now enjoy it in speedy sightseeing as we speed along such highways as U.S. 66.

Seeing the West, to one who is a nature lover, is apt to be like a very hungry person sitting down to a table loaded with delicious food. After a time he loses his appetite and does not enjoy the food. Thus, often sightseers in a journey through the West see so much wonderful and gorgeous scenery that after a short time they will not go a few miles out of the way to view some point of great interest. They seem to forget that when the trip is over and they are back at home, they may be two or three thousand miles from the scene they missed.

Speed can be blamed for many not seeing many points of interest on a trip of this kind. They get so used to speed that they get in

a hurry and will not take the time necessary for some side trips.

The Meteorite Crater

Take for instance the Meteorite Crater, 19 miles west of Winslow, Arizona. It is the world's greatest meteorite crater and yet because it is five miles off U.S. 66 on a gravel road, a lot of sightseers pass it up. They just won't take the time and trouble to travel ten miles, which the roundtrip from the highway amounts to, to see one of the most interesting of sights.

This crater is more than fifty times larger than any other meteroite crater in this world of ours. The width of the crater is nearly a mile, and the crater pit is visibly 570 feet deep. The crater is surrounded by a ridge of thrown-up rock standing 150 feet above the surrounding plain. It is as though a whole trainload of atomic bombs had been dropped all at once in the same spot, and the displaced earth and rock which makes the ridge around the crater is estimated at several million tons.

One could stand and gaze into that crater, study and read about it for a week and still just be probably starting to comprehend the enormous pressure that made that vast crater and displaced so much dirt and rock to make such a great circular ridge.

Centuries and centuries ago, perhaps hundreds of centuries ago, a meteor plunged to earth here, and seconds afterward there was that gaping great hole in the earth and that great ridge was formed by the earth and stone forced up from the spot where the crater now is. What a sight that must have been, millions of tons of earth and stone moved within a few seconds, moved in a neat manner and piled so that it forms a great ridge, neatly as though it had been created by men aided by a thousand bulldozers. It is a great sight and one that should not be missed simply because it is five miles off the paved highway.

Petrified Forest

The Petrified Forest of Arizona, twenty miles east of Holbrook, is not exactly on Highway 66, but Highway 260 and the National Park Service road (State 63) make a loop from U.S. 66 directly through the Petrified Forest, so that it is just a short detour

(Continued on page 107)

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IT LOOKED LIKE AN EASY SHOT UNTIL...

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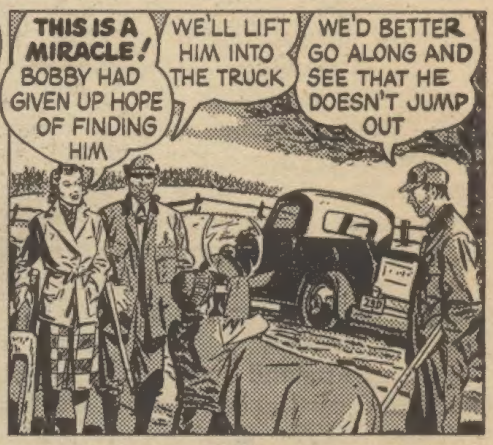
THIS IS A MIRACLE! BOBBY HAD GIVEN UP HOPE OF FINDING HIM
WE'LL LIFT HIM INTO THE TRUCK
WE'D BETTER GO ALONG AND SEE THAT HE DOESN'T JUMP OUT

DEER WON'T BE MOVIN' MUCH TILL LATE AFTERNOON. WHY NOT KNOCK OFF AND HAVE A BITE WITH US?
I'M SOLD. SUPPOSE WE COULD CLEAN UP A BIT, TOO?

WE'VE ALL THE ROOM IN THE WORLD. WHY NOT FINISH YOUR WEEK OUT HERE?
IF YOU'RE SURE WE WON'T BE CROWDING YOU
TALL AND CERTAINLY HANDSOME!

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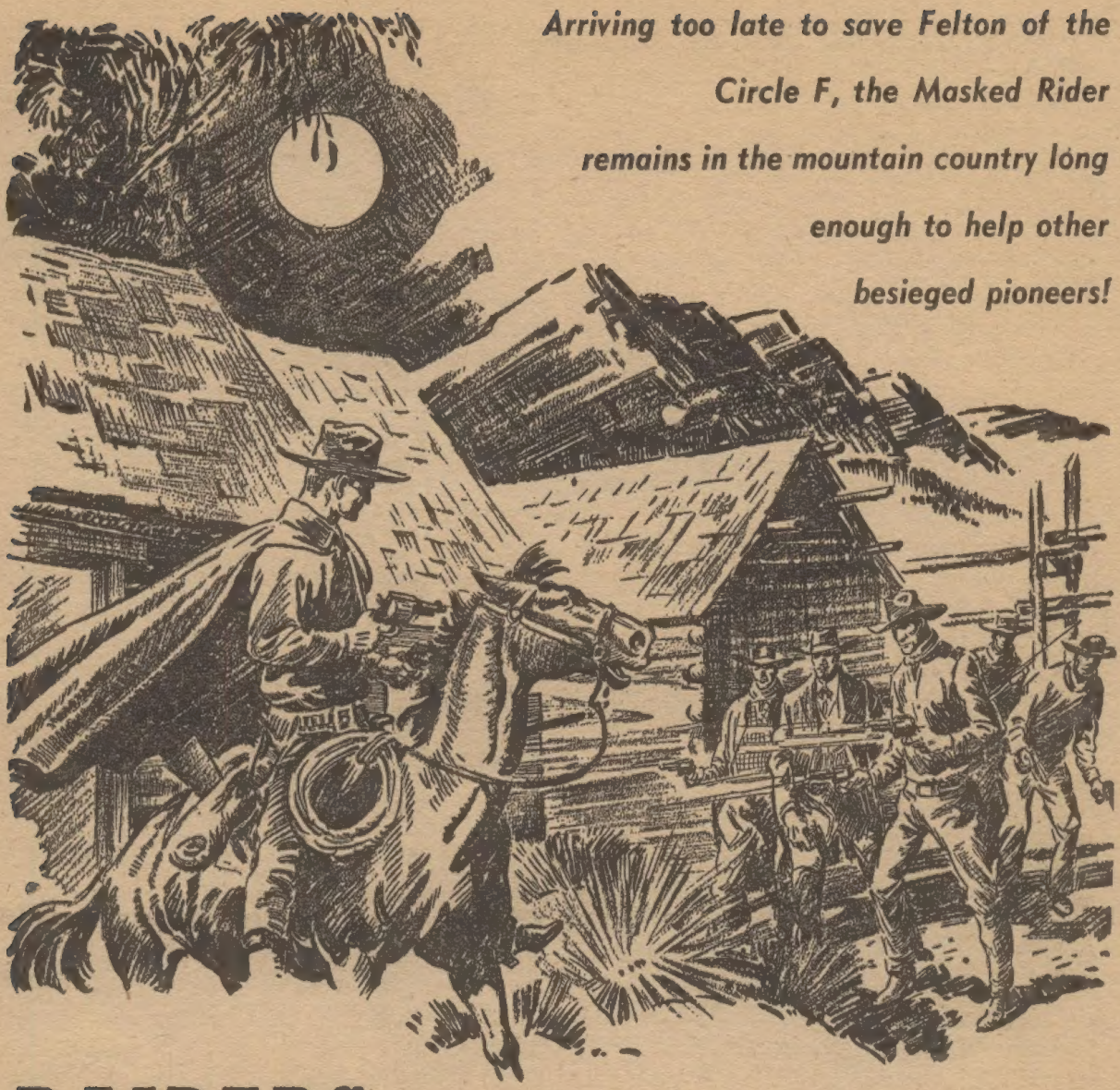

Arriving too late to save Felton of the Circle F, the Masked Rider remains in the mountain country long enough to help other besieged pioneers!

RAIDERS of the CENTRAL HILLS

CHAPTER I

Ruthless And Power-Mad

IN THE night the killers dropped rein and stole toward the ranchhouse, their guns ready. The hue of the lamplit windows in the low building matched that of the gibbous moon hanging in the sky, a rich yellow over the high plateau region of central Texas.

A WAYNE MORGAN NOVEL BY TOM CURRY

Near the house the yard was partially lighted by streamers from the open windows. Six stealthy figures slipped toward the headquarters of John Felton's Circle F, the outfit of a pioneer of the mountainous region in the heart of the Lone Star State. Of the two in the lead it could be seen even in the dimness that one was tall and slat-thin, while the other was a heavy man, so heavy he could be called fat. His stertorous breathing seemed loud in the stillness.

"All right, Lichette," he ordered in a hoarse whisper. "Call him out."

The thin man to whom he spoke, known as "Knifenose" Lichette, drew in a deep breath of the cool night air that was stirred by a gentle west wind.

"I hope it works, Mr. Tate," he grumbled. "Felton's been on the prod since our boys missed him last week from ambush. You saw those notices he tacked up around town."

"It'll work," growled the man called Tate. "Do just what I told you to."

He waved a pudgy hand and the quartet of gunhands trailing them faded behind a couple of sheds in which ranch impedimenta had been stored. Lichette and Tate went on, then the stout man stopped and knelt down in a shaft of shadow while Lichette kept going until he was within ten paces of the side door which was closed against the night chill.

"Felton—John Felton," sang out Lichette, in a sharp, high-pitched voice. "I got the man who tried to drygulch you!"

After a moment the door opened wide. The rancher stood framed in the opening, against the lighted room. On a center table behind him burned a white-shaded lamp, and a woman of forty-five was sitting in a rocking chair, sewing. Felton had just put down his newspaper, the Riverside *Cowman,* to answer the hail.

"Who is it?" he asked. "You sure you got the right hombre? I offered a reward for him and I'll pay it—"

Two heavy revolvers roared. One was Lichette's, the other that of the fat man, on one knee and shooting from another angle. They couldn't miss. The deadly lead slugs slashed into the rancher and he doubled up, mouth opening wide. He sank to his knee and fell out across the sill. His wife began to scream. Her shrill, panic-stricken screeches split the night with awful warning. A couple of cowboys dashed from a small bunk house fifty yards from the ranchhouse. One of them gripped a carbine, the other a Colt pistol. They threw themselves into action, not knowing their employer was already past saving. The fat man had turned with surprising speed back to a shed where his aides waited. Knifenose Lichette ran across the yard.

GUNS pinned the belligerent waddies as Mrs. Felton bent over her husband, begging him pitifully to speak to her. Two more Circle F men dashed out of the bunkhouse.

Drumming hoofs sounded and a rider swept into the yard, an awe-inspiring figure on a coal-black, swift stallion.

"The Masked Rider!" bawled one of Felton's fighting cowhands.

"The Masked Rider!" echoed Knifenose Lichette in terror.

He gripped Tate's fleshy arm with fear-inspired strength and the fat man cursed him.

"You fool!" growled Tate. "This is perfect!"

The Masked Rider was a magnificent figure as he swept into view. His black cape fluttered behind him in the wind of speed and as he turned, the light touched the black patch of the domino mask covering his eyes. The black sombrero he wore seemed to increase his height. Power, stamina, fighting courage showed in the man who throughout the length and breadth of the West was spoken of in awed tones as the Robin Hood outlaw.

No one knew why he had so suddenly appeared, but he had heard the firing, and

the frantic cries of the stricken woman. In one hand now he held a pistol, ready to do battle.

Behind him came another horseman, a ghost in the shadows, a gray ghost in a draped blanket.

From the shed, Lichette and the fat man's other gunslingers threw concentrated lead at the Circle F men. The cowboy with the carbine checked his rush and swung around, to limp away.

toward the shed. But guns met him and he was driven off.

"Come on!" ordered Tate, from his hiding place, and raced away to lead the retreat of his killers.

Their mounts were near, and they jumped to their saddles and spurred off.

The Masked Rider whirled the great black stallion he rode and came pelting back into the light.

"Felton!" he sang out. "John Felton!"

WAYNE MORGAN

The Masked Rider's impetus carried him past the lighted doorway, his pistols smashing in the direction of the shed. He heard the shrieking metal aimed his way from the outbuildings, and now the excited Circle F men, jumping for cover, were shooting at him, seeing only that hurtling figure and concluding he must be the chief attacker of their boss.

Suddenly then, the bloodcurdling mountain lion howl rent the night, rising over the sounds of battle as the gray ghost following the masked man swerved

The Circle F cowboys had glimpsed him in the mêlée, but they hadn't seen the real slayers of John Felton, the men who had wounded the Circle F waddy. Cursing the Masked Rider they began pumping slugs at him.

It was an even closer call for the masked man than before, for he had not expected such a welcome at the ranch of a man he had come to help. A carbine bullet cut the felt of his peaked sombrero, another zipped through the folds of his ebon cape. Then Midnight bounded

on around the stable, and the acrid powder smoke slowly drifted skyward in the night. . . .

It was growing late as Knifenose Lichette and his evil boss, Cachell Tate, backed by their armed gunslingers, approached a second ranch.

"You're pushin' your luck, Mr. Tate," said Knifenose. "This is the Star S. It's bigger than Felton's."

"We're lucky tonight," replied the fat leader. "Maybe we can settle it once and for all by shooting the owner of this outfit. The Star S is the key to the whole situation . . . Let's see, I believe Colonel Abe Sellers owns this place. Is that right?"

"Yes, Mr. Tate. He's a tough customer, too, a real fightin' man, and he has nine or ten cowboys here."

Tate nodded and inquired:

"Any heirs?"

"He has a son around twenty, and a mighty pretty daughter a couple of years older. Name of Kathy." Knifenose smacked his lips. "I wouldn't mind hitchin' up with her any old time she'd wink at me."

"She's yours if she'll have you," Tate said. "If you can get her to marry you everything would be fine, with Sellers and his son gone."

THEY had drawn closer to the spread now, slowing and coming in behind a long shed. The moon shone on the winding ribbon of the river and across the spacious yard.

"You're doing a good job, Lichette," complimented Tate. "It's hard for me to keep all the details straight on these stupid cowmen, with as much as I have on my mind. The information you bring me is excellent."

Tate's cold-blooded attitude toward the people who lived in the vicinity ignored the fact that they were human beings, with all the hopes, fears and loves of such.

The Texans on the Star S spread, like the Feltons, had struggled hard to carve a living out of this wild land.

Now this Cachell Tate had come to destroy them, to wreck their lives, to satisfy his own inordinate lust for power.

Even as Tate spoke a huge man, carrying a carbine in one hand, loomed in the bunkhouse doorway. Lantern light glinted on the big fellow's reddish hair. Tate threw up his rifle to take a bead on him.

"Don't shoot, Mr. Tate," warned Lichette in a low voice. "That's only Red Billings, one of Colonel Sellers' waddies. I'll tend to him later myself—he's sweet on Kathy. We need to down Sellers and his son first—if you get Billings it'll give 'em warnin'."

Tate lowered his gun and they waited in the shadow. The big cowboy slowly made a circuit of the yard, now and then glancing their way, but they were well-hidden.

HE SEEMED suspicious, however, and poked several dark spots, as if he had caught some slight sounds of their approach.

Then a window in the house suddenly went up.

A girl's voice came on the night wind to the deadly watchers.

"Is that you, Red?" she called.

"Yes, Miss Kathy."

"Is anything wrong?"

"No, ma'am," replied Billings. "I was just takin' a look-see right before I turned in."

"Father and Ben have gone to bed," she said. "I'm just going."

"I'm on my way, right now," said the cowboy meekly.

He returned to the bunkhouse, and the lights there and in the ranchhouse went out.

"That's that," murmured Cachell Tate. "You're right, Lichette. This is a bigger proposition than Felton's, and if we call Sellers out it will bring 'em all on our heads. We can't take a chance now . . . Well, we'll let the counselor have a stab at it, and give Sellers the opportunity to get out of here."

He swung his horse and led the way back to the road.

CHAPTER II

The Masked Avenger

IN A HIDDEN mountain camp, a bivouac the famous Masked Rider, Nemesis of the criminal, and friend of the helpless and oppressed, had set up as a base of operations, the big Robin Hood outlaw dismounted. He stood for a moment soothing the lather-damp, silky neck of his equally famous mount, Midnight. The light was vague, but the masked man became quickly aware that someone was approaching. A sibilant hail reached him:

"Senor!"

He smiled in the darkness, for he recognized the voice, the anxious tones of the one man in the world who knew anything of the secret of his mysterious life—his companion of the trail.

The man who had called, a ghostly figure in the dim night light, came nearer and slipped from the back of a wiry gray.

"You're not hurt, Senor?" asked a Yaqui Indian named Blue Hawk, for he was the Masked Rider's comrade. And "Senor" was the only name he ever used in speaking to the masked man.

"No, Hawk," his partner's deep voice assured him. "But it was close. That looked like John Felton lying in the doorway at the Circle F. I'll have to make sure as soon as possible whether he's dead or not."

"There were men behind the sheds," said Blue Hawk, nodding. "They shot him. They were shooting at the cowboys, too. I saw them."

"Did you recognize them!" asked the Masked Rider eagerly.

"No, Senor. When they fired on me I had to get away quickly."

"Well, let's have a hot meal, Blue Hawk—some coffee and fried beef. We

A sharp voice shouted: "Reach! High, now, or we'll sieve you!" (CHAP. II)

can build a fire that won't be seen from any distance under that jutting boulder."

Before attending to their own needs, however, they first took care of their horses. The Masked Rider groomed Midnight lovingly, after unsaddling. He spoke in a low, gentle voice to the beautiful stallion, and when he had finished with Midnight, he picketed the mount in a small mountain park carpeted with velvet-green grass.

The pack-horses which the companions of the trail always took with them on their travels—a pinto and a hammerhead roan used as a spare mount when it was advisable that Midnight should not be seen and recognized, were already grazing. Blue Hawk turned out his gray, and set about preparing food.

Moodily, the Masked Rider removed his black mask, peaked sombrero and cape he always wore in the guise of avenger. He was a ruggedly handsome man with thick dark hair, blue eyes in which shone purpose and determination, and a lean, bronzed face. He stood well over six feet, a powerful fighting man of the rangeland.

It was a long time now since the Masked Rider and his great black stallion had become a legend from the Rio Grande to the Canadian border, but from the start of his Robin Hood career, hard-eyed outlaws had cursed his name. The evil of heart hated and feared this dark-clad avenger. They feared the speed of his accurate, flaming Colts, his grim, unfailing courage.

Stories, some true, many more false, were legion concerning the Masked Rider. Many there were, too, on the wide ranges who had good reason to bless his name, for although he was called outlaw himself, he gave all his fighting strength to help those in trouble. Nothing was known about him, though, except that he was still young, for his past was a closed book. Not even Blue Hawk, his constant companion, knew his real name. But he had adopted one to use when making investigations, and whenever he wanted to show himself to men in towns or at various ranches.

That name was Wayne Morgan, and the character he assumed when using it was that of a wandering cowboy.

It was inevitable that since the methods of this mysterious rider of the owlhoot trail were so unorthodox he should be wanted by the authorities in more than one state. For in spite of the high purpose to which he had dedicated his life—as had Blue Hawk, also—fate had dealt cruelly with the Robin Hood outlaw.

Crimes he had never committed had been blamed on him. Bank robberies, stage holdups and killings, other dastardly deeds, by gossip and rumor, by the intent of lying bandits who used his name to hide their own crimes, had been pinned on the Masked Rider. He had given up hope of ever vindicating himself, and had accepted the fact that manhunters, driven by greed for blood-money rewards, were constantly pursuing him.

NEVERTHELESS, he had also accepted the challenge, and his sympathy for the underdog sent him into one fight after another in the cause of the troubled. In this his lonely soul found gratification. And he took comfort in the knowledge that along the Masked Rider's back trail were those many champions who would never forget the good he had done.

His speech in his rôle of masked avenger was that of an educated man. Yet he could—and did—lapse into the lingo of the cow country when appearing as the cowhand, Wayne Morgan. He had a deep affection for the drawling speech of his West.

As he turned back to the campfire now, the sizzling strips of beef which Blue Hawk had hung on sharpened sticks over the little fire gave off an appetizing aroma. Soon the two would enjoy a hot meal. The water for the coffee was coming to a boil.

By the light of the dancing fire, the Masked Rider unfolded the paper notice he had taken from the town bulletin board in Riverside, the small cow settlement which was the focal point of this region

of Texas. He glanced at the startling printed words again, though he knew them by heart:

I NEED HELP. MY LIFE IS IN DANGER. TWICE MY ENEMIES HAVE TRIED TO DRYGULCH ME. I WILL PAY $200.00 REWARD TO ANYONE EXPOSING THE VILLAINS WHO WANT TO KILL ME.
JOHN R. FELTON, CIRCLE F RANCH

"Too late," muttered Wayne Morgan, the Masked Rider. "I was too late, by minutes."

Once he had met John Felton, owner of the small Circle F Ranch west of Riverside, and remembered Felton as a kindly, upright, splendid citizen of the Lone Star State. Once, when in dire trouble himself Wayne Morgan had stopped at the Circle F, Felton, without questioning, had fed him, and dressed a wound dealt him by enemies on his trail.

The Masked Rider never forgot a friend. When he had seen Felton's appeal for help on the Riverside bulletin board, as he and Blue Hawk had been passing through the town, he had immediately started for the Circle F. But he had arrived—too late.

From what he had been able to see himself, and from what Blue Hawk had observed, the Masked Rider was sure that Felton's attackers had drawn him out and shot him down without warning. John Felton's belief that his life was in danger had been confirmed.

"Tomorrow," the Masked Rider said to the Yaqui, who was pouring steaming coffee into two tin cups, "Wayne Morgan will head for Felton's. Maybe I can get on the track of the gunhands who killed Felton."

"*Si*, Senor. Now you must eat."

Blue Hawk was not perturbed, for his usual mien was one of solemnity. He spoke good English, in a somewhat choppy style, for he had been educated at a mission school. He had other attributes, however, which made him indispensible to the Masked Rider, for he could handle a pistol and rifle like an expert, though his favorite weapon was the bow from which the feathered arrows he sent sped with deadly aim.

Blue Hawk had taken off the gray blanket he had worn during the recent sortie. He was now attired in his usual white drill breeches and shirt, with a long knife thrust into the sash about his lean waist. A crimson headband bound his straight black hair, setting off his noble, coppery face, solemnly proud.

Angered as well as saddened by what had happened to John Felton, a man he had called friend, the Robin Hood outlaw stared at the plate of food the Yaqui handed him.

"Senor, you must eat," insisted Blue Hawk. He had to repeat it three times before his companion fell to.

When they had finished the meal, they put out the fire and, wrapped in blankets, went to sleep. They slept on a hair trigger, these men, hunted and hounded as they were. The slightest warning sound would fetch them alert, ready guns in hand.

The red sun, rising over the mountainous region through which the mighty Colorado River of Texas flowed, slid past the grayish sentinel buttes of the wild spot where the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk had camped, edging around to nudge them awake.

COFFEE heated from the night before, cold meat, and hardtack sufficed for breakfast. Before going to sleep the Masked Rider had stowed his black outfit carefully in his saddle-bags. Now, as Wayne Morgan, he wore the garb of an ordinary range cowhand, pants shoved into halfboots, easy-fitting shirt, Stetson with the chinstrap loose in its butternut runner.

He saddled the hammerheaded roan in the mountain park, leaving Midnight to rest and graze until his return. Leaving Blue Hawk to guard the camp, Morgan rode off toward the Felton ranch, intending to learn exactly what had happened and to see if he could find any clues as to the gunhands in the night. With his garb

changed his manner had likewise changed. No longer was he grim, but instead was a careless, good-natured waddy. A cattle country tune was on his lips as he cantered along.

When the sun had turned from crimson to a warm golden yellow, Wayne Morgan came out on the winding dirt track which led through the hills north of the Colorado. To his left lay Riverside, the cowtown where the railroad spur ended. Between the road, skirting the rough country, and the river, which ran in its deep bed four miles southward, was Circle F range.

Felton's home was perhaps two miles across rolling country but Morgan stayed on the trail for a time, since it would be easier going for the roan. Finally he saw a crude sign, made of a pine slab with branches tacked to it, forming an arrow pointing westward with a star and an S, shaped from the supple willow fronds.

"Star S," he murmured.

Morgan had known this region before, so he knew the Star S belonged to a Colonel Abe Sellers. It was a larger spread than Felton's Circle F.

When he left the trail he rode over grassy pasture, where bunches of steers grazed. Once he sighted a band of mustangs, no doubt ranch animals loose on the range. He passed one collection of cows so close he could read the brands. Some were Circle F beefs, others had a star with an S in its center on their hides.

Sighting the low buildings of the Circle F, he swung onto a beaten track leading straight to the ranch. It was bordered by rock outcroppings and brush growth. On this bright, peaceful morning, he had no idea there might be danger lurking close at hand, and he was humming as he approached the Felton spread.

The contour of the land and a good-sized grove of rocks and trees hid the

nearby buildings which were near a tributary of the river. Morgan had no warning as he came abreast of the grove until a sharp voice challenged:

A gigantic wasp burred in the air behind the Masked Rider, and then Shorty grunted in agony (CHAP. XI)

"Reach! High, now, or we'll sieve you!"

From the corner of his eye, Morgan saw the black eyes of the rifle muzzles pinning him from a distance of a few yards. To resist would be suicide, for nobody could miss at such pointblank range.

Morgan's hands rose slowly.

"Now you look better," a sardonic voice observed.

A man stepped from the bush and caught the roan's rein. The hammerhead shied, which might have given Morgan his chance, but he was too well aware of the steady carbines pinning him. He might get the nearest fellow but there were others who would riddle him. They might be a sheriff's or marshal's posse, so he waited.

The tall, bony man who had come out from the grove was sharp of face, and his nose looked like a wedge. In the bright light his skin showed its sallowness and dirty pockmarks. Morgan, a good judge of personalities, thought his features had a Gallic cast.

"What's the idea, suh?" he asked civilly. "I was just moseyin' along, thinkin' maybe I'd find a ridin' job at that ranch over there."

The sharp nose twitched. "Oh, you were, were you?"

The fellow wore unclean brown clothes and a pinch-crown Stetson. Holstered Colts were at his snake hips. He had to keep hitching up his gun-belts since there was nothing to prevent them from sliding down. With a dexterous movement of his free hand he snatched the pistol from Morgan's open holster.

Morgan kept up his hands though he had another revolver under his shirt, an ordinary precaution.

"Get down but don't forget to keep reachin'," ordered the sharp-featured man.

The prisoner walked slowly into the grove, always covered. Several men there, heavily armed fighters, watched him. Some of them were short, others taller, fat or thin, medium, all in riding garb. Hard eyes glinted, but nobody said anything. The sharp-faced boss led in the roan and tossed the rein to an aide.

"Hold on to him, Shorty. All right, waddy. Sit down on that flat rock and keep shut. We'll kill you if you try anything funny."

And the way he said that left no doubt in Morgan's mind that he meant it. Morgan was relieved that they had accepted him for what he said he was.

NEXT ISSUE
The Masked Rider and Blue Hawk
IN
Land Pirates of Wagon Gap
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CHAPTER III

Grave on the Range

WAYNE MORGAN had a long wait, an hour or more, under the guns. From the manner of his captors he had no doubt they would pull trigger and not worry about it if they did. He kept his blue eyes veiled but he could study the men. He would know them again. Maybe his scrutiny made some of them uneasy for one whispered to the chief, and all of them stared fixedly at Morgan.

At last hoofs clopped on the rocky road from the Circle F, coming toward them.

"Here he is, Knifenose," one of the men said.

Knifenose Lichette stepped close to Morgan, and became even more watchful.

"Quiet, now," he commanded.

They might be going to drygulch the rider, Morgan thought. He could sacrifice his own life by attempting to give the man warning, but it would be futile.

But they did not raise their rifles or get into firing position. They just waited and soon a plump yellow gelding came into view. On the horse sat a large, expansive-looking man of forty or so who obviously was no expert rider, nor was he dressed as one. He was wearing a black frock coat with flying tails, a flat-topped hat, ruffled white shirt with knotted stock, fawn-colored pants and shiny gaiters. From a saddle hook hung a brown-leather case. His florid face was ornamented with a thin black line of clipped mustache and the smudge of a little goatee. His small, dark eyes darted from side to side.

As he passed, he carelessly waved a white hand, on one finger of which glistened a diamond.

After he had ridden on Knifenose said: "All right, boys, let's mosey."

The man holding Morgan's roan hooked the reins to the horn and slapped the horse, sending him trotting off, free. The man nearest to Morgan slapped him alongside the head, nearly toppling him off the

flat rock.

"Go on—hightail!" he snarled.

Morgan was glad enough to escape so easily. He picked himself up and started for the trail. Lichette kicked him hard to hurry him on his way and the rest laughed. They picked up their horses, mounted, moved out.

Wayne Morgan trudged toward the Circle F. Glancing back, he saw the dust rising as Knifenose Lichette pulled away. He thought the riders were heading toward Riverside, but the next time he looked, the dust that was slowly staining the clear air and marking their route showed that they were describing a wide arc. This would turn them toward the next ranch, the Star S.

The hammerhead roan had stopped and dropped his head to graze not far away. Morgan did not have to walk far. As he mounted and rode on to the Circle F he saw that up on the hill behind the ranchhouse a couple of cowboys were dejectedly piling rocks from a drag onto a fresh mound of reddish earth. It looked like a range grave.

"Felton's," he muttered, biting his lip.

A waddy limped out to greet him when he dismounted and climbed the hill.

"Howdy," the Circle F hand said.

"What's wrong?" asked Morgan. "Is Mr. Felton around?"

The cowboy swung an arm toward the new grave on the hill.

"He's dead. Killed last night by the Masked Rider."

"The Masked Rider?" That was a shock. "How do you savvy?"

"How do I savvy? I saw it myself and so did the other boys. The Masked Rider left me this—a hole in the leg." He patted his bandaged limb.

"I'm mighty sorry about Felton," Morgan murmured.

"We all are. He was the best boss on the range."

"Maybe his missus will need more help to run this ranch, now her husband's gone. Me, I'm huntin' a ridin' job."

The waddy shook his head. Through an open door, Morgan could see into the house. A woman sat in a chair, staring at the wall. She was beyond weeping.

"She's been like that ever since," said the Circle F cowboy in a low voice. "She just sold out, cheap. Her son went up the trail three years ago and settled in Kansas. She's got a married daughter in New Orleans and aims to join her."

"Who bought the spread?"

"Don't savvy exactly. All I know is that that lawyer who was just here, name of Fronce, from Riverside, had the papers for her to sign."

"*Gracias,* then. Reckon I'll mosey. I'm sure sorry."

Morgan turned and started to walk to where he had left the roan. The Circle F was as quiet as death.

MOUNTED again, Morgan rode slowly and carefully on that dust trail he had seen. His keen vision told him the men ahead were keeping together as they reached the east-west trail and swung west for the Star S.

"If Knifenose catches me again," he muttered, "I won't get off so easy." He stayed off the beaten tracks, taking to the rough country north of the road, lying back. He was sure there was a connection between Lawyer Fronce, the rider of the yellow horse, and the savage gunhands who had captured him, Morgan, and had they remotely guessed his true identity, he would no longer be alive to trail them.

Hidden on a screened high point overlooking the big Star S, Morgan saw Fronce's horse standing in the ranch yard. Knifenose and his bunch were concealed in a patch of woods not far off, to cover the attorney and nip any trouble in the bud. But this time Wayne Morgan did not walk into their hands.

Fronce did not stay long at the Star S. He soon came out, mounted his fat, sleek horse, and rode off. Knifenose and his crew fell in behind him. Morgan watched them as they hit the road at a fast clip, headed for the town of Riverside.

When he was sure they were out of sight, he mounted his roan and worked

down to the ranch level. The Star S stood above high-water mark on the same tributary as the Felton spread. Bigger than the Circle F, its range included pastures north and south of the road, and there were bunches of grazing cattle everywhere. The house was long and low, with several wings. There was a bunkhouse, stables, and other necessary outbuildings, corrals and cribs. The structures were freshly painted, glistening white in the bright sunlight. The place had a homey, pleasant aspect.

As Wayne Morgan rode into the spacious yard, a giant Texan with red hair, showing from beneath his big Stetson, his powerful body threatening to burst from his leather clothing, and with a red star on his boot tops, slouched toward him. His face was open and pleasant, decorated with freckles.

"Light and set," he invited. "You're a stranger, ain't you?" He seemed a bit guarded, watchful, though he was hospitable and genial.

"That's right. My handle is Wayne Morgan, mister. Is the boss around?"

"Colonel Sellers? Yeah, he's inside. He'll be right out." He supplied his own name. "I'm Arch Billings, but they call me Red. I ride for the colonel. But he's fixin' to pull out to see about somethin'. One of our neighbors was gunned last night by the Masked Rider."

"You mean Felton? I just came from there."

"You did? How's his wife holdin' up?"

Morgan shook his head. He slid from saddle and brought out the "makin's," passing them to "Red" Billings.

"She's stricken, Red. She sold the ranch to an hombre named Fronce, some lawyer, one of the boys told me."

"Tch-tch!" Red Billings seemed disturbed. "Why, that mealy-mouthed son-of-a-hoptoad was here half an hour ago, tryin' to get the boss to sell him the Star S for a song! I'll be a—"

"Red!—oh Red!" a girl called to the huge Texan from the kitchen doorway. There was an authoritative note in her pleasant voice and it seemed to Morgan that at the sound of it an invisible string controlled big Billings, that the cowboy was under full check-rein.

"Yes, ma'am, Kathy." He jumped toward her, saying to Morgan, "That's Miss Kathy Sellers."

She was small, but delightfully curved, with curly black hair and a vivacious, lovely face. She looked past Red and briefly sized up Wayne Morgan, who heard Red say, "Oh, he's a visitor, ma'am—just pulled in. He wants your dad."

"Father will be out in a minute, sir," she called. "But he's going over to see Mrs. Felton of the Circle F. Her husband was shot and killed last night, they say by an outlaw called the Masked Rider. Won't you step in and have a bite?"

"Thank you, ma'am," Morgan said, sweeping off his hat as he approached.

SHE was friendly and hospitable in the best Texas tradition. Red Billings sat down with Morgan at the long table in the roomy kitchen. Kathy had a pot of coffee on the back of her stove, and warm biscuits in the oven, cooked meat and some wildberry jam, of which she was proud since she had made it herself, as Red took care to point out.

"She's the finest cook this side of the Sabine, suh," he boasted.

She liked that and gave Red a smile.

"Oh, here's Father!" she said.

A tall gentleman, of around fifty, came into the kitchen. Colonel Abe Sellers, owner of the Star S, a cowman of the central mountain region, was a fine example of an upstanding citizen of Texas. Morgan liked his looks at first glance, liked the massive head with its crisp hair touched with gray, the strong-jawed, bearded face and the dark eyes with their candor.

He shook hands with Morgan, who had risen as the rancher came into the kitchen.

"Welcome, suh," the colonel boomed, in a deep bass voice. "I see Kathy is takin' care of you. Make yourself comfortable, please." He insisted that Morgan sit down and keep on eating, taking a chair at the table himself. "I'm headin'

for a neighbor's place—Felton's. He was shot and killed in the night, suh, by a black-clad outlaw. I've got to see if I can help his widow."

"This hombre just came from the Circle F, Colonel Sellers," said Red Billings. "He claims Mrs. Felton has already sold out to Fronce."

Sellers plainly had a quick temper, for he flushed a deep-red, and exhibited the same chagrined annoyance Billings had shown at that news.

"You don't tell me!" he cried. "Why, that cussed jaw expert! Next time I meet him I'll push in his fat—"

"Father—Father!" reproved Kathy.

"Huh!" Colonel Sellers still fumed. "I aimed to help John's widow. I wonder if she got a decent price?"

"No, suh," said Morgan. "Accordin' to her men she let the ranch go plumb cheap. She's goin' to her daughter in New Orleans."

Wayne Morgan was curious. Lawyer Fronce had called at the Circle F right after the owner's death. But he had come to the Star S *before*. Criminals, with a successful system of dishonesty, usually kept repeating it until caught. He decided to probe into the matter and learn what he could.

"I saw Fronce over this way, suh," he remarked. "Red says you had an offer from him yourself."

"Yes—yes." Sellers nodded. "It was ridiculous. He offered about a tenth of what my ranch is worth. I don't aim to sell, anyway, even though beef prices are down this year. They'll come back up again."

"I wonder if Fronce tried to buy Felton's before Felton died?"

"Yes, John mentioned it to me, come to think of it. Fronce made him a couple of offers."

That was it, then, thought Morgan. First they attempted to get what they wanted quietly, for a small price. And then—

He looked at Colonel Abe Sellers, measuring the Texan. It was simple enough to deduce that Fronce's hidden backers, Knifenose and his gun hands, would take care of Sellers just the way they had Felton.

He considered warning Sellers there and then. But he had just arrived at the Star S and they might be suspicious if he seemed to know too much.

"I was hopin' you could give me a ridin' job, suh," he said to the colonel. "I was over on the Brazos, but times were slack and they let most of the men go."

Colonel Sellers was deeply regretful. "I'm mighty sorry, Morgan. I'd like to, because you've got the set of a real cowboy. But I only have a small crew myself—eight men—and I can hardly keep them busy these days. But you're welcome to stay here as long as you like. We'll stake you to grub and a bunk."

AS HE spoke a tall young fellow of twenty, in corduroy and spurred boots, came in.

"This is my boy, Ben," said the colonel, with obvious pride. "I'm a widower, you know. Kathy keeps the house for us."

Ben shook hands with Morgan. He had his father's fine looks, and was a year or two younger than his sister.

Sellers stood up. "Well, I'll be headin' for the Circle F. You hold down the ranch, Red."

Ben was going with his father. Four waddies came out of the bunkhouse, and began saddling mustangs from the nearby corrals. Wayne Morgan went out into the yard and stood in the shade of the house with Billings.

"Are they goin' across country?" asked Morgan.

"I reckon so. Why?"

Morgan shrugged. "After what happened to Felton, I should think you'd be on the prod, Red."

Billings nodded and looked thoughtful. Pretty soon he strolled over and spoke to the colonel, who listened to the warning the giant cowboy delivered. Then Sellers, his son and the four cowboys mounted and rode off in the direction of the Circle F.

"Where's your bedroll?" asked Billings.

"I left it back in a camp I made,"

evaded Morgan. "I can get it."

"Well, why don't you? You heard what the colonel said. You're welcome here as long as you like to stay."

"*Gracias.* I do need a ridin' job, though. Maybe I'll find one somewheres else."

"I wish you luck, cowboy. The season's slack."

CHAPTER IV

Subtle Warning

MORGAN liked Billings, liked the redhead's good-humor. He thought Abe Sellers and his family were splendid folks, too, and the idea of letting rapscallions such as Knifenose and Fronce destroy them was impossible to contemplate.

Besides, the Masked Rider had been blamed for Felton's killing, and Morgan had a shrewd hunch that if Sellers died, the deed also would be chalked up against the black-clad horseman. He burned with anger at the injustice of it, for he was sure that again his foes were using the Masked Rider to cover their own crimes.

"Miss Kathy is one of the prettiest girls I ever saw," Morgan suddenly remarked to Billings.

Red gave him a quick, appraising look. "I aim to marry her," he declared firmly.

Morgan sensed a touch of natural jealousy, and to allay Billings' anxiety, he said:

"I've got a girl myself, in Fort Worth. Some day I'm goin' back there and hitch up with her."

"That's fine." Billings was pleased. This Wayne Morgan was a handsome fellow and Red had been afraid of competition. "Yes, suh, Morgan, I s'pose we're in the same canoe. Soon as I get together a little money I aim to ask her."

Billings chatted on, glad to have someone with whom to talk.

"You know what?" he abruptly changed the subject to ask. "They say there's big rewards posted for this Masked Rider outlaw. Well, I figure he must have a hidden camp not too far off, maybe in the north hills. That's logical, ain't it? Soon as things quiet down a bit I'm goin' to hunt that bandit and fetch him in. With what I collect I can marry Kathy."

"You're convinced this Masked Rider shot Felton, ain't you?"

"I sure am. The man they sent over here from the Circle F says they all saw that black-clad hombre last night when their boss died."

"But does that prove it?"

"Say, you sound like you're defendin' the Masked Rider!"

"Oh, no," said Morgan hastily. "But I was just wonderin'. Felton posted a warnin' notice in Riverside, sayin' drygulchers had tried for him. You know that, don't you?"

"Yeah, we heard about it."

"In other words, some men were after him. From what the colonel said, this Counselor Fronce made Felton offers, then the trouble started when Felton wouldn't sell. Now Fronce has bought the Circle F—for somebody. Right away, soon as they have the Circle F, they come here and try to get this ranch. The colonel says no. What would you figure happens next?"

Red Billings swore, slapped his husky thigh. "I'd say they'll go for Sellers the way they did Felton, and that's that."

"All right. It's up to you, then, Red, you and your friends. You've got to protect your boss, day and night, stand guard. As for the Masked Rider, is it likely he'd be workin' with such a sidewinder as this Fronce? The Masked Rider is a lone operator, from all I've ever heard about him, and he never stays put for long, so what would he want with a little ranch like Felton's? If you ask me, there were others hidden around the Circle F last night, men who weren't spotted durin' the ruckus. They did the killin'. The cowboys got excited when the gunfire began. They rushed out, sighted the Masked Rider, who likely had come to help Felton, not harm him."

Billings' eyes narrowed. "Say, you ap-

pear to savvy a powerful lot about it, Morgan!"

Wayne Morgan met his gaze squarely. "I'm just thinkin' along a logical line, Red. Did you ever hear of a cuss they call Knifenose?"

"Knifenose Lichette? Why, sure. He's a rustler and maybe worse."

"What would you say if I told you that Lichette and this Fronce hombre are hooked up, though not in the open?"

NOW Billings was convinced that the apparently stray visitor knew a good deal more about what was going on than the Star S did.

"Come on, spit it out," he ordered. "What makes you say Lichette and Fronce are pards?"

Quickly, Morgan described how during his approach to Felton's spread he had been ambushed by Knifenose Lichette and his hands, questioned and held until Counselor Fronce had bought the ranch from the stricken widow.

"Cuss me yellow!" Billings scratched his crisp reddish hair. He grew thoughtful, for he really had something to chew on.

Wayne Morgan felt he had done all he could for the moment by giving the Star S fair warning. As yet he could not guess how extensive the enemy operations might become, but he intended to take all possible steps to save Colonel Abe Sellers and any other intended victims. And he hoped to clear the Masked Rider's name of John Felton's killing, although this was secondary. Had he had only himself to consider he might have pulled out of the region and let it go at that.

"I'll be moseyin' along, Red," he said. "I'll ask around and see if there's any jobs. I may be back if I don't have any luck."

"*Bueno.* You'll be plumb welcome, Morgan."

Mounting his roan, Wayne Morgan waved to Billings and rode off toward the trail to town. Counselor Fronce had an office in Riverside and the Masked Rider's next stop would be at that settlement.

When he finally rode into the cowtown, on the bank of the widening stream, night had fallen over Riverside. Lamps blinked in the filmed windows, the honkytonks were running full-blast, and tinny music and the voices of men and women resounded from the heart of town.

Stores were grouped around the usual square plaza in the Texas settlement. The sidewalks were covered by extensions of first-story roof lines, some of them railed for use as balconies.

A number of the principal buildings boasted false fronts. Dust was two inches deep in the streets.

In black, for Wayne Morgan had now become the Masked Rider, and with the domino mask covering the upper part of his grim, rugged face, he sat Midnight in the darkness, studying the noisy center. Somewhere in there must be Counselor Fronce, and perhaps Knifenose Lichette.

Behind the masked man, Blue Hawk, his Yaqui comrade, waited for the next move.

"Hawk!" said the Masked Rider softly.

"*Si,* Senor."

"Hold on to Midnight. I'm going in."

"*Si.* Careful, Senor. They watch for the Masked Rider."

The Masked Rider merely nodded, determined to make a survey.

The flitting figure reached the tree-shadowed plaza and paused by a huge live oak. Not far from him stood a rectangular structure—the town marshal's office. At one end the Masked Rider could see iron bars on a small window high up in the wall, marking the cell-block.

But the whole place was dark. No doubt the officer in charge was enjoying a drink or two in one of the saloons, as was the habit of such town guardians. A marshal could observe better from such a vantage point and sometimes check the swift gun battles flaring as men in their cups grew truculent.

There was a bulletin board at the edge of the plaza, where a lantern on a post served as a street light. The Masked Rider approached on the shaded side of the jail and stepped out to glance at the

public notices. A freshly inked one had been tacked in the middle:

WANTED FOR THE KILLING OF
JOHN FELTON
THE MASKED RIDER
REWARD

Near this was a duplicate notice of Felton's appeal for information against those seeking his life. The rancher's foreboding had been only too substantial. Now he was gone and it was too late to help him.

THE Masked Rider drew away, a bitter set to his strong mouth. Moving up the street, he shunned lights and the few passersby on the sidewalks. Riders came and went. For the most part visitors and citizens were either in the saloons or at home.

Eternal vigilance was the watchword of the black-clad man. If anyone noticed the swift, dark figure, it was only a brief, unsatisfying glimpse. He stopped in front of a darkened office where a shingle hung from a rustic iron frame contrived by the local blacksmith. The sign proclaimed:

HANSON D. FRONCE, ATT'Y AT LAW
LAND DEEDS

A lawyer would hardly be in his office at such an hour, which suited the Masked Rider, for he had a bone to pick with the counselor. Knifenose Lichette had held him captive while Fronce bought the Circle F. Fronce had also sought to purchase the Star S. The riddle must be solved, and quickly, before it was too late to save the colonel.

Taking care that his presence should not be known, he slipped through a side passage to the street behind the honky-tonks. Stealthily he began checking the various places. Finally, in a large place known as the Wolf's Den, he looked through open doors all the way to the front and sighted Knifenose Lichette, with several of the armed men who had been with him at the Circle F, hanging over the counter. Now to locate Fronce!

CHAPTER V

Sidewinder Conference

AS SOON as the Masked Rider reached the end of the business section, he started through a dark narrow alley leading back to the main street. He heard footsteps and pushed against the adobe brick wall, freezing there.

A large man in a frock coat, straight hat and ruffled shirt hurried past the gap. The florid-faced Counselor Fronce was making haste toward some destination. He was a bit out of breath but whistling to himself, happy as a lark, his thin mustache and small goatee twitching. He went on by the black alley without a side glance.

The Masked Rider took a step out and saw Fronce turn into the Wolf's Den. He hurried to the back again but when he peered through to the front street he did not spy the counselor, although Lichette and his friends were still at the bar.

The saloon and gambling sections of the Wolf's Den occupied two-thirds of the roomy, single-storied building. In the rear were kitchens. After a hunt the Masked Rider located two open windows, partially covered by purple plush curtains, screening a private dining room on the far side.

He made no sound and was careful to keep low so that a chance look through a window would not show him to those inside. Fronce was there all right, he saw, just pulling out the vacant chair at a round table set for four in the center of the room.

"Well, well, well!" cried the lawyer jovially, as he joined the party. "How's my baby this evening? You look lovelier than ever, dear." He reached over to pinch the rouged cheek of a girl. "Good evening, Mr. Tate. How are you, Georgette?"

Fronce's plump "baby" was wearing a blue dress with shiny spangles. A jeweled Spanish comb was set in her thick chestnut curls. She laughed and showed white

teeth at Fronce's compliment. Georgette, the other girl, whom Fronce had greeted, was a blonde with sophisticated eyes. Her black gown was cut low and she wore a pearl necklace.

Squatted in an armchair, his side toward the windows, was an inordinately fat man—the man whom Fronce had addressed as "Tate." His rasping breath was so audible it carried to the Masked Rider outside. Morgan studied this stout personage toward whom Fronce exhibited great deference.

The jowls of the man called Tate were smooth-shaven but he had a brown mustache over his open wet lips. His clothes were conservatively elegant. He kept his pudgy hands clasped before him on the white tablecloth except when he took a sip from the thin-stemmed wine glass by his plate. Flesh ringed the man's eyes and the deep wrinkles in his brow were strangely suggestive of evil thoughts.

His prominent ears stuck out from a round head with pomaded brown hair parted so exactly in the middle that it looked unnatural. Soon the keen eyes of the Masked Rider discerned the faint lines where a toupee had been brushed into what remained of Tate's own hair.

The Masked Rider had been of the opinion that Hanson Fronce might be the chief of the enemies on Colonel Sellers' trail, but now seeing this fat man put a different complexion on the matter. The counselor was behaving as a subordinate before a feared superior, and Tate exuded ruthless power.

"Please pour me another glass of wine, Cachell dear," begged the blonde, and Tate smiled at her fondly as he served her.

He was gallant in his attitude toward the two girls, and as the supper party proceeded, neither man spared compliments to his particular companion.

A Mexican waiter in a white apron entered, his tray laden with plates of steaming green-turtle soup. More wine

[*Turn page*]

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was poured, then a fowl and a huge rib roast of beef appeared. Tate ate with tremendous gusto, savoring his rich food—and liquor still flowed freely.

The talk was for the most part vapid, a lot of it downright silly, and twice the Masked Rider stole off to make sure he had not been observed by anyone outside. At last dessert and coffee were brought, with a box of long black cigars. Fronce and Tate rose. "We have a little business, ladies," said the stout man. "Will you retire for a time now, and join us again in about twenty minutes?"

RELUCTANTLY, the girls went out. Fronce made sure the door was shut, then slid the bolt and returned to his seat. The counselor picked up a candle in a crystal stick and deferentially held it while Tate lighted his cigar, then puffed on his own smoke. "You talked with Sellers?" inquired Tate bluntly.

"Yes sir. He refused your offer. Says he'll see himself down below first."

A slow, sardonic smile spread over the fat face. "The colonel spoke truer than he knew. He's signed his own death warrant, and his son's, too."

"There's a mighty pretty girl, his daughter Katherine—" began Fronce eagerly.

"Yes, I know. Lichette mentioned her. Get her off your mind, Fronce. Lichette has already spoken for her and I don't want any friction between my men. Understand?"

"Certainly, Mr. Tate," agreed Fronce. "Is there a wife to deal with?"

"No. Sellers is a widower. His daughter keeps house for him. I made sure of all that when I was out there, and besides Lichette had already checked up."

"Very well. We'll see to the colonel and his son. Lichette can handle the girl, I'm sure. With the men gone, the women have no heart for further resistance. . . . Have you that report for me?"

"Yes, sir." Fronce reached inside his coat and brought out a folded document. He shook it out and passed it to Tate.

The wrinkles deepening in his brow, the fat man held it to the light so he could study it. For a time his rasping breath sounded in the private dining room like an obbligato to the confused babel and snatches of music from the saloon.

Then Tate again was speaking, in his authoritative manner:

"It's working out even better than I expected, Fronce! Lichette and a couple more picked men will wear black capes and hats, domino masks and ride black horses when they go for Sellers. Such outfits aren't hard to find, and the survivors will swear up and down that they saw the Masked Rider."

This seemed most amusing to Cachell Tate. His face reddened and seamed as he uttered hoarse chuckles, with Fronce joining in his laughter.

"The jackal laughs when his master does," thought the Masked Rider. He was burning with anger at Tate's cold-blooded plan to use him once more as a screen behind which Abe Sellers and his son could be slain with impunity.

"Get a story ready for the Riverside *Cowman,*" ordered Tate. "The paper comes out in a couple of days, and you can write it all up in advance. Salt it well with stuff about the Masked Rider, making sure it's plain he engineered the killings. Have the editor offer five hundred dollars, *dead,* for the outlaw. I'll guarantee it. Lichette will tell the boys to kill the Masked Rider on sight, if he's still hanging around. It isn't likely anyone else will be able to claim the reward. Everything can be blamed on that outlaw. This business covers us completely."

"Yes, sir. They're already saying the Masked Rider killed John Felton. Have you seen the circulars the marshal posted?"

Though Fronce was smiling broadly, it was plain that the lawyer was a bit apprehensive. He knew something of the black-clad horseman, and so did Knifenose Lichette. Both were aware that the Masked Rider was not an opponent to be taken lightly.

But Cachell Tate was apparently unimpressed by the Masked Rider's reputation. This may have been because he be-

lieved he had screened himself carefully from possible vengeance.

THE Masked Rider, absorbed by what was being said inside, had for one moment dropped his careful look-out. He jumped as a quick step, the faint jingle of silver spurs, sounded almost on top of him. He was swinging as a man came into full view, past the rear corner of the building. At that instant the draft stirred the purple window drapes and a shaft of lamplight fell on the black-clad figure.

"The Masked Rider!" the gunhand shouted. He was fast. As he howled the warning he went into a shooting crouch, digging for his Colt.

"Lichette! The Masked Rider!"

He was one of the crew who had been drinking with Knifenose in the bar. Probably he had been sent out to make a routine check around the building, as wary outlaws did every so often.

The man's pistol was clear of its leather case and rising. The Masked Rider threw himself down, twisting his lithe body. The enemy gun seemed to flame in his face and something slashed him, shocked him. Fragments of metal and brick pricked his bronzed cheeks.

"Lichette!" bawled the excited gunslinger. "I got him!"

They were all coming, now. The masked man could hear the answering shouts and heavy thudding of booted feet. Cachell Tate appeared in the window, a nickel-plated revolver in a hairy fat hand. There was a grimly bitter thought in the Masked Rider's keen mind, even as he fought for life with every fiber of his being. If he died there in that narrow alley, and his passing became public knowledge, then outlaws could no longer blame their operations on him. On the other hand, if Tate's men captured him, wounded and helpless, or dead, they could leave his body near the Star S as certain proof of his guilt after they had done for the colonel and his son.

They were coming. He heard answering yells and the thudding of heavy boots. The Masked Rider had made a flash draw from his sprawl. Now his immediate opponent was taking careful aim at him.

Morgan's heavy revolver roared, the black gun spitting lead and flame.

Lichette and his gunmen were coming out both the rear and front ways to trap him. Tate had jumped back into the supper room as the Masked Rider threw a deadly slug at the man close to the corner.

The Wolf's Den was living up to its name.

CHAPTER VI

Red Has a Notion

RED BILLINGS felt slightly ashamed of himself, to tell the truth. Easy-going and good-natured, for the first time in his life he had a definite objective, a long-range prospect that had nothing to do with such matters as roping a recalcitrant steer or how to reach the nearest town with a bunch of the boys.

It was that weakness which had kept him poor in worldly goods. He had never even considered accumulating a nest egg until he had fallen under Kathy Sellers' spell. It had always seemed the best of sport to ride in with his friends, whooping it up, shooting pistols in the air, and galloping half-wild mustangs as they hit Main Street. After drinks, the waddies would quickly lose their hard-earned wages across gaming tables or during the sprees that ensued.

But now in such amusement there was no longer any charm for Billings. He was ashamed when he thought of all the good money he had carelessly flung to the four winds.

Maybe it was because of the talks he had had with Kathy, though she had never preached to him. She had just soberly pointed out the error of such ways and he had taken to heart every word she said. Exquisite and femininely dainty as she was she had easily managed

the huge Billings. It would always be that way; he would never rebel and he would never want to. She was his and he was hers, and no argument about it.

Billings had been called "Red" for so long he had almost forgotten his given name, Archer, bestowed upon his defenseless head by fond parents who had died in an epidemic which had swept the Southwest. Red had been twelve when he lost them and he could still recall the poignancy of his grief, his lost feeling. But at that age no blow is too great to bear and adaptation is simple. Neighbors had taken in the orphan but he hadn't imposed on them for long. He had found a job as a wagon boy and soon had become a range rider. Since then he had been a typical cowboy, shifting from ranch to ranch as he had pleased—until he met Kathy Sellers.

The previous day, Colonel Abe Sellers had ridden over to offer his condolences and a helping hand to the widow of his friend and neighbor, John Felton, and had not returned until dark. He had brought the news that she had sold the Circle F, just as the wandering cowboy, Wayne Morgan, had said. She was packing her trunk and this morning she meant to start the long journey to her daughter's home in Louisiana.

After breakfast, the boss had said he wanted the north pasture looked over because sometimes there was trouble up there, not trouble caused by men, but by the vagaries of nature. Billings had asked if he could go and Sellers had given him the nod. Red saddled Rocker, a big buckskin, that was his favorite mount for a trip of any duration.

Rocker did rock more than the ordinary mustang at any speed, and he had other qualities to compensate for any rocking he did do. He was strong enough to carry Billings' great weight and he had staying powers.

As Red was checking his gear, Kathy came from the open kitchen door and approached him. She had a starched blue apron over her working dress and looked sweet and fresh in the morning light. She stopped and crossed her arms, a small but capable hand gripping each of her rounded arms, a characteristic posture, as she watched Billings.

There was no ring on Kathy's engagement finger but Red intended to remedy that before long. He had already written to St. Louis, asking for a jeweler's catalogue. When he had something to start on he would make their understanding formal.

"You going up there?" asked the girl.

"Yes, Kathy. You savvy we have to check now and then."

SHE DIDN'T tell him not to go. She knew better than that. Men had to do their work, even if it happened to be dangerous.

As he grinned at her and swung a burly leg over Rocker, who immediately began to buck, she cautioned quietly:

"Take care of yourself, Red."

Billings stared at her. Rocker was cutting up a bit as was his habit of mornings. It was the mustang in him and as soon as he had it out of his system he would behave for the rest of the day unless something unusual spooked him. As he quieted, Red asked Kathy:

"What's botherin' yuh?"

There were indentations in Kathy's arms, four in each where her fingertips tightly gripped the firm flesh.

"I think there was somebody around here the other night, right after John Felton was killed," she said soberly.

Rocker, heaving from his exercise, was impatiently jerking his head, wanting to get going. Billings patted the animal's sleekly groomed neck. He spent long hours caring for Rocker.

"What makes yuh say that?" he asked.

He noted her slight shrug. "I didn't see anything. I just had a feeling, that's all."

Red had heard of feminine intuition. Kathy was no nervous girl to be imagining such things. He thought of casting about for tracks, but with men coming and going all the time, the ground in the vicinity of the buildings was always cut up by crisscrossing hoofprints.

"I'll be back, Kathy," he said.

"Make sure of it, Red. Just do your job and get home before dark."

This admonition gave Billings a slight jolt, but he didn't let her see that. His face never changed; he could play poker with the best. He wondered if Kathy had guessed somehow that he had a second motive in asking for the assignment that day. First, it was a job to do for the ranch. While doing it he intended to search for the Masked Rider, but he hadn't mentioned it because he instinctively knew that Kathy wouldn't approve.

"Don't worry, Kathy. Yuh'll be seein' too much of me. Yuh can't get rid of me."

His good-humored face broke into a smile and she answered in the manner she always did.

Then he saluted her and was off, across rolling, rising range. It was a lovely day as the sun turned from crimson to gold, a cool breeze tangy with the good odors of trees and dew-damp grass. In the distance cattle grazed in small bunches, and with a horse like Rocker under him any man would be happy to be alive on such a morning.

Billings wore his six-shooter. A carbine was shoved into the scabbard under one big leg.

"We'll hunt for that Masked Rider's hideout while we're up there," he told Rocker. "I've got a hunch he's camped in those rocks. If we catch him and get the rewards, we'll ask Kathy pronto."

Billings had no way of knowing that the Masked Rider was innocent of Felton's killing and of other awful deeds blamed on the black-sombreroed head of the mysterious outlaw.

In his mind's eye he pictured how wonderful it would be to build a little ranch for Kathy, install her there as his wife. A gay tune sprang to his lips at this imaginary picture of domestic bliss.

To his left was a rough area partially overgrown with trees. He was still close to the ranchhouse. Shadowed brown outcroppings could be seen in the broken ground that Billings knew were ledges of weathered soft coal. Sometimes they dug out a wagonload to use as fuel.

This was not the only spot around the Star S where coal showed. There must be great seams of it under the range. To his right, eastward a bit, was another uneven break, fringed by brush, with more signs of the coal and gray, green and reddish rocks surrounded by a rail fence.

BILLINGS kept going. Soon he crossed the east-west highway. The Star S was such a big spread that Sellers owned range north of the state road. Farther to the east the looming cliffs of the badlands came almost to the track, but the serrated heights receded and between them and the road were good enough pastures, although they were broken by vari-colored rock patches, some of them fenced. The heights offered protection to cattle during the northers and acted as an excellent fence in that direction.

The road was the best way through here. It skillfully avoided the difficult stretches but kept to higher, dry ground between the drop into the river valley and the mountains. Sellers owned all this save for the public right-of-way. Eastward lay the Circle F, then Riverside. Not far away a white-watered rill, springing from the cliffs, noisily made a crooked way down toward the quieter river.

Billings kept on, slanting northeast a bit. Some big birds rose with raucous cries, and that drew him. He dismounted near a fenced rock nest, with scrub brush growing around and through it. Red dropped rein and took a hammer and some nails from a saddlebag.

The buzzards flew off, scolding him. Two swollen, dead cows lay not far from the rocks. Swarms of flies buzzed around them, so Billings stayed upwind—he knew what they smelled like, for this had happened before. That was why Sellers had fenced off some of the danger spots. Now and then a rail would go down for one reason or another and from time to time the colonel would send a rider through to check up and make repairs.

That was what Billings was doing. He fixed the broken fence. A dead tree had fallen across it and smashed it so the

stupid cattle had been able to get inside the pen.

He mounted and rode on. While he moved he kept watching eastward, north of the road, for it was his guess that the outlaw known as the Masked Rider might be hidden there somewhere. It was certainly logical. The black-clad bandit could quickly emerge from any of a thousand hiding places, hit the road, and reach any point he desired with a minimum of trouble.

However, Billings had no intention of making a blind search of those wooded, broken mountains. Such a task could occupy the rest of his natural life. But as he worked his keen young eyes, trained to read tiny signs in the distance, studied the skyline over the suspected area.

Noon came and he stopped in the shade of a big tree to rest Rocker and to eat the bread-and-meat sandwiches fixed for him by Kathy's loving hands. After he had smoked he shoved on.

The buzzards seemed to be out in force, he thought. He watched three circling high in the intense azure, just three black specks. Suddenly they dropped and did not rise. It would have meant nothing to an untrained person, but to Red Billings it told a detailed story. Something on the ground below had caused the scavengers to descend.

The spot was in the badlands and so it could hardly be a dead steer.

It might be some animal that had died from natural causes, but usually a deer or bear would crawl into some cave or crevice when about to cash in its chips. The sign was just the sort of thing Billings had been watching for so earnestly. Everybody had to eat, even the Masked Rider. What could be more likely than that he would drop a deer or a bear to provide himself with meat? The outlaw wouldn't want to show himself on the range in the daylight. He might be seen, trailed.

Red had seen to most of the danger spots on the Star S north range. He felt he could now pursue his second objective in riding up here. The movements of the buzzards, combined with Billings' shrewd hunch, certainly made it worthwhile.

CHAPTER VII

Manhunt

IT TOOK Red Billings two hours to get near the ground over which he had last spied the three vultures. And as he slowly pushed along winding, dangerous trails, he had seen more of them wheeling down.

He had to leave Rocker finally and move on afoot, carrying his carbine in one hand. Towering, stained cliffs, eroded by centuries of weathering, dominated this stretch and at times he had to hold on to make his way along.

But above, as he knew, for he had hunted through here before, was a wooded plateau, a haven for wild life, raiding bears who came down of nights after calves, deer and smaller game. Red was also aware that several miles eastward there was a winding but passable trail for horses to the upper levels, but he had no desire to waste the necessary time in reaching it.

He was cautious. The Masked Rider might be just as good, even a better tracker than he was. A man living in the wilderness would be aware of all the tricks.

Soon he located what had brought the buzzards. They were all over it—the carcass of a buck. They flapped their wings and scolded him, and he didn't like that, not because there was anything to fear from the birds but because someone near might hear.

He backed off, his sharp eyes noting the fact that choice cuts of meat had been taken from the buck.

Billings stayed far enough from the spot so as not to send the vultures into the air. He was searching for sign, tracks left by the hunter who had killed the buck. It wasn't the type of ground which holds impressions, but still he expected a little something, an unweathered rock turned

over by a passing boot, a drop or two of dried blood from the venison. But he found nothing, nothing at all.

It was only because he knew about the in-trail eastward that he crossed the dip and climbed the next height. He studied every inch of the terrain around but was disappointed. He squatted in the shadow of a giant boulder, studying it, and staring at the eastern horizon where he hoped to glimpse wisps of smoke. When a man killed a deer usually he didn't go far before building a fire so he could eat.

But again he was disappointed. He saw not the slightest trace of vapor. Then a puff of wind cooled his hot, exertion-reddened face. He sniffed with widened nostrils and his jaw tightened, for on that breeze he scented the unmistakable odor of broiling venison!

It was so strong he knew it could not be far away, and in his mind's eye he could imagine the Masked Rider crouching before a fire built under a jutting cliff so the smoke would break and dissipate, holding a strip of deer meat on a sharpened stick.

"I'll bet I savvy right where he is!" he thought excitedly.

Though excited he didn't let it overrule his tracker's caution. He took an hour to cover a short distance, and despite his build, Billings could move lithely, and with quiet skill. Knowing the locality as well as he did, he could guess about where the outlaw camp he sought would be.

He came in over an eroded, round-topped outcropping, his carbine in position as he slowly peered over the top. The fire was no longer smoking, and this instantly warned him. Somehow his approach must have been detected.

In his first swift glance he took in the little camp in the hollow, surrounded except for two narrow exits, one at either end, by rising ledges screened with scrub brush. He saw the figure of a big man lying on his side on a folded horse blanket a few steps from the blackened remains of the cookfire.

"Reach—" Billings broke off, then said in a disappointed voice, "Well, I'll be! Morgan! What you doin' up here?"

"Don't shoot!" commanded Wayne Morgan in a sharp, imperative voice.

"Oh, I won't, *amigo,*" answered Red Billings, thinking Morgan was speaking to him. He pointed his carbine muzzle groundward.

SUDDENLY, from his higher position, he saw a dark-faced Indian above and to his left. The savage had a powerful bow, bent to utmost tension, and a feathered arrow was aimed straight at Billings. From such close range the arrow could drive right through a man. The Indian must have had him covered all the time, but as Morgan spoke he slowly relaxed the long bow and without a sound disappeared from Red's sight before Billings could catch his breath.

Billings dropped down, calling a warning to Morgan.

"Hey, there's an Indian up there, Morgan! Watch yourself."

"He's all right, Red," replied Morgan.

[*Turn page*]

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"Just a wanderin' Reservation trader I met up with."

Billings was puzzled, but he trusted Morgan. And the Indian could have killed him if he had wanted to. Red realized that Morgan must have been speaking to his red man with the bow when he had ordered him not to shoot.

"I'm comin' down!" called Billings.

"Come ahead. I've got some hot coffee, Red." Morgan was quietly friendly, but there was a strained note in his voice.

Billings backed down the striated, slanting ledge and moved around through the narrow trail, strewn with shale, into the camp. Morgan still lay on his side, his cheek in his hand, resting on one elbow.

Red was grinning widely, laughing at himself. He passed the "makin's" to Morgan, and squatted before him on his haunches.

"When I think of the time and trouble I spent stalkin' you," he said, "I could kick myself, Morgan. Shucks, I was convinced I'd found that Masked Rider's camp! Well, the joke's on me. Go ahead and laugh. I don't mind."

Morgan's grave, bronzed face looked a bit pale, and strained. He didn't laugh at Red but he seemed glad to see the oversized waddy. Billings was good company.

Red poured two tin cups of coffee from the blackened pot standing on the hot embers. There was pack gear around, a couple of saddles, a spare blanket, saddlebags, the kind of stuff carried on horses or other beasts of burden.

"Say, are you all right?" inquired Billings.

Now he noticed the bulge under the left side of Morgan's shirt. The wandering waddy was lying on his right side. Red could glimpse a bandage through the unbuttoned "V" of the collar, a binding across the whole shoulder.

"I got a little scratch last night," drawled Wayne Morgan.

"That's a shame. Does it hurt much? Listen, why don't you let me help you back to our place? You can get good treatment there and I'll see you have a bunk to lie up in and decent grub till you're well. Colonel Sellers will be happy to have you, Morgan."

Billings' warm, hospitable soul plainly showed in his consideration for the injured man.

"It's not too bad," Morgan told him. "I can stand it. The bullet slashed flesh and muscle and shocked me some, but I was able to ride afterwards." After a brief pause, Morgan added, "I'm a fool, too, Red. You'd think a man who's handled guns as much as I have would sure savvy better than to point a Colt at himself while he was monkeyin' with it!"

This satisfied Red's natural curiosity as to how Morgan had suffered the gunshot wound. The big cowboy stood up to stretch, his half-smoked quirly between his lips. A horse whinnied and he turned toward the north gap out of the screened hollow. He saw a couple of grazing animals, one a pinto, another a magnificent black creature, an ebon stallion, the look of which took his breath away.

"By hook, Morgan! Look at that black! Say, I wonder if I was right, after all, and the Masked Rider ain't far from us? They say he forks a black stallion as good or better than that one."

Midnight moved on past the narrow vista.

"Oh, that Indian has a bunch of fine critters, Red," said Morgan, trying to distract Billings' interest.

BUT the Star S cowboy started walking toward the gap for a better look at the horses.

"Look here, Red!" called Morgan, sitting up. "I've got real important news I picked up in Riverside last night."

Billings paused, turned. "What is it?"

"You know the Wolf's Den? Well, I was in there havin' a snifter when I heard some drunken gunhands braggin'. I listened, for they were talkin' about your boss, Colonel Sellers."

Red came back. "What did they say?"

"They said that a big band of armed killers aimed to come at your boss, probably tonight after dark. And some of 'em are goin' to be dressed up like the Masked

Rider, and ride black horses."

That stopped Billings in his tracks. Quickly he looked up at the sky. The sun was still bright, but was going down. It would take a while to work out of where he was and ride back to the Star S. Billings no longer had any interest in the black stallion, or in hunting the Masked Rider. His first and foremost consideration was the protection of Kathy and the ranch.

"I better get goin' then," he said hastily. "Why don't you come along? Though I oughtn't to ask you to stick your head into such danger."

"I aimed to hit for the Star S before dark, Red. I can ride. Wait till I saddle up. My Indian friend can take care of the camp. Where's your horse?"

Billings told him. "I better get goin'," he repeated. "Will your Indian pard give you a hand catchin' your roan?"

"Sure. Where'll I meet you?"

"You savvy the east-west highway? I'll see you on a line north of the Star S. Just ride along the road and I'll be there."

"Bueno."

Worried by Morgan's warning, Billings could scarcely wait to get back home. He dogtrotted and walked as fast as he could across the rough land, back to where he had left Rocky. The sun was far down when he finally sighted Wayne Morgan along the public highway, and waved to him, soon joining him.

They cut across the Star S range, straight toward the ranch. Morgan rode his hammerhead roan easily, although it was obvious the jolting hurt his wound. He kept his left shoulder hunched most of the time, but no word of complaint came from him. He noticed the dark-brown coal outcroppings and other ledges as they moved toward the Star S with all possible speed, and asked Billings a question or two about them.

"What's the fencing for around those rocks, Red?" he inquired.

"Sometimes the cows get in and lick that green stuff. There must be salt mixed with it. It's arsenic, we think, for it poisons the critters." Billings was uneasy, though, he had something on his mind. "Look here, Morgan," he went on, "I was sent out today to check the north range and make sure of the fences around those poison licks, savvy? Please don't say anything about me huntin' for the Masked Rider, will you? It might worry Kathy."

"That suits me fine." Wayne Morgan nodded. "As for the Masked Rider, Red, you can't always believe everything you hear about him, or even everything you see. Those gunhands aim to blame everything on that outlaw. I heard 'em."

The sun was on the horizon, an enlarged, reddening globe as they slid from their saddles in the Star S yard. The cowboys were in, and Colonel Abe Sellers sat on his front porch, waiting for the dinner Kathy was cooking, the appetizing odors of which could be smelled on the cooling air. Ben Sellers, the colonel's son, sat on the railing near his father.

Kathy looked out an open window and waved to Red. She was busily at work in the roomy kitchen. The men had to be fed.

Billings and Morgan unsaddled their horses and turned them into a corral. Red took the guest to the colonel, and told Sellers about the wound, even before he delivered Morgan's warning of the coming attack on the ranch.

"Hot water, that's the ticket," declared Sellers, rising. "Come on, Morgan. Kathy always keeps a kettle on the back of the stove. We'll clean it up and put on fresh bandages so you won't have any trouble with it later."

In the lean-to shed, the colonel poured steaming water into a basin. Kathy gave them clean cloths and Morgan bared his shoulder. Sellers examined the hurt.

"You're lucky," he said after a careful scrutiny. "Missed the bone by a quarter-inch and come out clean."

NEXT ISSUE

SHERIFFING IS A GIFT

A Story of Cow-Country Law

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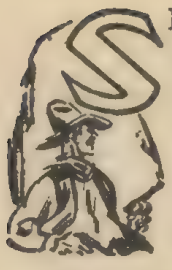
AND OTHER SMASHING YARNS

CHAPTER VIII

Night Raid



SELLERS cleansed Wayne Morgan's wound and replaced the bandage Blue Hawk had put on it. As the colonel worked, Red Billings delivered Morgan's warning and the wandering waddy corroborated it.

"Who are the coyotes who are plannin' all this?" asked Sellers gravely. "Do you know?"

"Do you know Knifenose Lichette?" asked Morgan in return. "I know they were his men. I'm also convinced that the lawyer who bought Felton's ranch—Fronce—is hooked to it, too, suh. Not only that, but Fronce kowtows to a fat hombre named Cachell Tate who might have a plump finger in the pie. What do you know about Tate, Colonel Sellers?"

But Sellers shook his head. He knew Fronce, and he knew Lichette, but Tate seemed to be a stranger to him.

The Star S took Morgan's warning to heart. Four cowboys were set, out from the buildings, to keep careful watch as night fell over the central mountain range. Guns and ammunition were out and ready to be snatched up.

Those not on watch were told to get some rest. In case of a fight, they would be awakened quickly enough. Morgan went to the bunkhouse with Red Billings, who had been out all day. He picked a bed, lay down, and was quickly dozing. Billings, too, was tired from the long ride and soon was snoring.

How long they had slept they could not tell when crackling gunshots and high-pitched yowls brought them from their bunks, hands grasping ready carbines.

"They're here!" growled Red Billings.

Wayne Morgan was right with him as they started out into the moonlit yard. Flashes of exploding rifles could be seen here and there. Sellers and his son, Ben, and the Star S waddies were all ready for the attack.

Wayne Morgan knelt at the corner of a barn, out from the Star S ranchhouse. Lamps had been blown out and the buildings cast dark shadows. Billings crouched close to Morgan and both men had their carbines loaded, ready for action. Around the ranch were the defenders, with cover, waiting as riders surged toward the yard. Hoofbeats shook the earth and, realizing they had been discovered, the attackers were uttering shrill cries meant to terrify their intended victims.

"There's the Masked Rider!" sang out Red.

He pointed to a dark figure in a cloak, high Stetson and a domino mask, flashing up on a black mustang. Billings raised his carbine and threw a slug at the black-clad rider, but it was a hasty shot and the black horse was moving fast, zigzagging.

"And there he is over on the other flank," said Morgan drily.

"Shucks!" said Red disgustedly. "There's a third dressed up like the Masked Rider."

Morgan was holding his fire, until the raiders drew closer. By now the sentries had made it safely back to the buildings and taken cover.

"I told you, Red," drawled Morgan. "You can't always believe your own eyes! It takes more than a mask and cape getup to make a man the real Masked Rider."

"I believe you!"

Morgan, still down on one knee, brought the carbine to shoulder. He was taking aim, calculating the wind, the speed of the riders' horses, for a lead. The carbine crackled and the nearest black-clad attacker slewed off his rearing, frightened mount and landed hard in the dirt. One of his comrades slowed, evidently meaning to pick him up, but Red Billings took advantage of this and fired. The rescuer jumped and instantly decided he didn't like it there. He rode off, fast.

The alert, hard-bitten reception by the Star S and Wayne Morgan did not please the midnight attackers. Shrill whistles rang out, then a burst of firing as the dark riders swerved off and pelted away from there.

THEY were gone as quickly as they had come, but the unmoving black splotch still lay out there a hundred yards from the barn. As soon as Morgan was convinced the raiders were not coming back, he trotted out with Red Billings at his side. Billings, as strong as two ordinary men, easily shouldered the stringy bandit, just a dead body now. Billings carried the corpse to the bunkhouse and, with watchers on the alert, Colonel Sellers, Morgan and Billings examined the dead fellow by the light of a lantern.

It was not Knifenose Lichette himself, they saw, as Morgan pulled off the black domino mask.

"I saw this hombre in town with Lichette, though," said Wayne Morgan. "These cusses fixed themselves up so as to pin more killin's and deviltry on the Masked Rider, Colonel."

"That's plain!"

"I wonder what they're after?" said Morgan. "I saw some coal on your range. You reckon that's what it is?"

Sellers shrugged. "It's soft coal, common enough in this country. It ain't what you'd call profitable to mine, unless you have a railroad to run and a thick vein of the stuff nearby. They're burnin' it in some engines these days."

"Have you heard of a new railroad comin' through here?"

"No, suh, I haven't, though the Central isn't too far away and there's a dinky line we ship cows over connectin' with Riverside—the T.B. and W., we call it, just for a chuckle. Two Bulls and a Wagon. Sometimes such coal can be used in manufacturin' but I haven't seen any factories goin' up in these parts."

They stared curiously at the dead bandit. He had on a cheap black cape, and a hairy black sombrero. When they searched him they found an extra pistol, a long knife, cigarette papers, a sack of tobacco, money, and personal belongings of scant interest to them. A hole would be dug out from the ranch and the killer who had come after them, only to die in the fight, would be buried by the Star S men.

They waited for a time but the enemy apparently had given up the attack for that night, anyway. Colonel Sellers set his sentries carefully and the rest turned in, Wayne Morgan sleeping in the bunkhouse near his big friend, Red Billings.

In the morning Kathy fed them. Morgan silently watched the pretty girl. That she and Billings were much in love was obvious. It gave the Masked Rider a pang of sorts. His own life was lonely as well as perilous, and he could never hope to settle down. But he could help people such as Billings and Kathy, Abe Sellers and his kind, protect them from destruction. That was his chief compensation.

The day was bright and promised to be warm. The work of the ranch had to go on, and Billings, acting foreman, was assigning tasks according to what the colonel desired done. Wayne Morgan sat on a corral fence for a time, thinking it all over. He intended to go after Cachell Tate, the fat chief he had unearthed in Riverside. That Tate was pushing Knifenose Lichette and his band against Sellers, he was fully assured. And Counselor Fronce was handling legal and other details for Tate.

"I'll have to find out what it is he's grabbin'," mused Morgan.

When he had reached his decision, he saddled his hammerhead roan. His wound had stiffened but it felt easier and all shock had passed. Always in the pink of physical condition, Morgan could throw off such a hurt much more quickly than could the average man.

Billings was getting ready to ride out with three of the Star S cowboys, and made no objection when Morgan told him he was going out for a while. Sellers was inside the house. Morgan saw him through an open window, sitting at his desk as he worked on a big ledger.

Kathy gave him some clean squares of cloth when he asked for them, and he wrapped them in a clean sheet of paper. He had several lengths of light buckskin string, and this was about all he thought he would require outside of his usual gear.

MORGAN mounted, waved to the Star S outfit, and rode away on the route over which he had come with Red Billings the previous day. He drew deep draughts of the aromatic, fresh morning air into his powerful lungs. The roan's jolting gait did not bother his shoulder wound as it had the night before. The worst was over, and it would heal rapidly.

The land rose toward the rocky heights and he could see the wooded mountains where Blue Hawk awaited his signal. The Yaqui was a loyal soul, would be loyal to the mysterious black-clad horseman to the death. It was the Indian who had helped Morgan out of his difficulty in Riverside, when Lichette's gunhands had trapped him in that narrow alley outside the Wolf's Den.

Wounded, fighting for his life, the Masked Rider had been unable to retreat toward either end of the passageway, and Cachell Tate held the open window of the private dining room. To have tried to climb through any other window would have proved fatal, for Tate's hirelings were thick in the place. The only way out had been up, and the Masked Rider had taken it.

With desperate strength, calling on his last reserves and gritting his teeth against the pain and shock of his gunshot wound, he had jumped for the edge of the low roof, made it, and pulled himself up. He had run across it, and then Blue Hawk, hearing the howls and exploding guns, had come boring in, leading Midnight. The Masked Rider had jumped to the wooden awning, landed in the gutter dust and hit leather, gun going as Blue Hawk helped cover his retreat.

They had hustled to their mountain ramp, after the close call, and there Red Billings had found Morgan.

Above the ranch buildings now, Morgan stopped his horse and dismounted, dropping rein. He was not far from the ranchhouse and could see some of the outfit riding away from the yard in other directions. And close by was one of the small fenced areas about which Morgan had questioned Red Billings. Billings had said the greenish outcroppings proved deadly to range cattle, which was the reason for fencing them off.

Morgan wanted to know more about that. He climbed the rail barrier and, with his hunting knife, dug out some of the softer stuff. Carefully he placed a sample in one of the cloths Kathy Sellers had given him. He gathered up the corners of the cloth and tied it tightly with a piece of light buckskin string. The sample in its little baglike container he stowed in one of his pouches. He returned to the roan, mounted and rode on in the direction of the east-west highway.

Wayne Morgan paused at several spots after that, collecting a sample at each one. When he had finished the job, noon was at hand, and he camped by a small stream, to eat a quick meal.

Crossing the highway after eating, Morgan rode near to a fenced spot where the strata broke from the ground. The picked bones of two steers lay near. Buzzards, wolves, and other animal raiders had done their work. He could see where the fencing had been newly repaired, no doubt by Red Billings the day before. He took another test sample from inside the rails. Then, returning to the road, he picked up speed and galloped onward.

When he reached the turn-off leading toward his own mountain bivouac, he swung through. The going grew rougher and the roan had to slow down.

Once off the highway, Morgan began to signal. Soon he heard Blue Hawk's answer in their private time-tested signal—the blood-chilling howl of the mountain lion!

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A Big Quarter's Worth At All Stands

CHAPTER IX

Puzzle

BLUE HAWK came to meet Wayne Morgan on the gray mustang.

"Senor!" said the Yaqui quietly. He was always happy to join his trail companion, but it was not in his stoical nature to be voluble about it.

"I've picked up some samples from the rock strata around the Star S, Blue Hawk," Morgan told him. "I'm taking them to Riverside, where I noticed a mining expert's office on Main Street. I'll get his opinion. They're gunning for the Masked Rider in town, so I'll go there as I am."

"*Si.* I cover you, Senor?"

"It might be a good idea. Lichette or some of his men may have glimpsed me fighting against them at the Star S, and Lichette saw me on my way to Felton's ranch when he captured me. He may grow suspicious, spotting me so often, so I could run into trouble. But stay back and don't show yourself unless you must."

"*Si.*" The Indian understood. Intelligent as he was he always obeyed orders to the letter.

Yaquis, it was generally conceded, could be tough customers when they chose. In their own land, deep in the Southwest and through the fastnesses of the Sierra Madre and wilds of northern Mexico, the Yaquis were held in fearsome respect. It was dangerous for white men to invade their domain, for the Yaquis resented intruders and had their own savage ways of dealing with them, one of which was to wrap the prisoner in a green cowhide and stake him out in the hot sun. As the sun dehydrated the hide, it shrank, and the unlucky victim was slowly but inexorably squeezed to death.

As fighters they were the peers of the renowned Apaches. Blue Hawk was no exception, for although he had been trained and educated in a mission, he could give an excellent account of himself in battle, as he had often proved to the hilt.

They rode to the highway together, then Blue Hawk dropped back and Wayne Morgan hurried on alone toward the settlement. He hoped to catch the mining man in his office before it closed for the night, and he quickly reached Riverside.

The adobe cabin occupied by the mineralogist was next to the last building at the north end of the town's main street. Some distance beyond it stood the Wolf's Den, drinking headquarters for Knifenose Lichette and his cronies. Counselor Fronce's place was nearer, and across the street was the Riverside House, the town's only hotel. Stores were open, and men and women strolled along the wooden walks. Horses and teams stood waiting, for it was not yet five o'clock.

Morgan studied the plaza and central parts of town, but he didn't see Lichette or any recognizable members of the outlaw band. He dismounted and, dropping the roan's reins over the rail, ducked under and crossed to the low stoop of the adobe cabin. In his pockets he had the bagged samples. The front door stood open and he could see into the cluttered shack.

To the left, as he looked in, was a long, wide table running the length of the side wall. On this stood microscopes, tools in racks, pieces of rocks of various hues, labeled containers, a shelf holding bottles of reagents, mortars and pestles, grinding apparatus, and a hundred other items useful in the trade.

At a sink to the rear stood a youth in a leather apron, washing pans, dishes, and glassware, scrubbing the articles with a brush and rinsing them clean before drying them. Boxes, bales and other junk littered the room, with narrow paths left for a passageway through the cluttered place. There was a typical odor, a mingling of suspended fine dusts and spilled chemicals.

The long sign across the front proclaimed:

MINERALOGIST
ORES ANALYZED

Close to the door, Morgan saw a board nailed to the center panel. The door opened inward and was held back by a jagged chunk of rock with black streaks through it, no doubt a mineral sample. The smaller sign read:

EDW. O. GAMEL, MIN. ENG.

"Good afternoon, young man," said a high-pitched voice.

Morgan glanced the other way and from this angle could see a small man with a bald head sitting at a desk facing the front windows. He wore corduroy pants and a shirt stained by splashes of reagents. His face was noteworthy because of extremely bright eyes, as dark and shiny as shoe buttons. He was perhaps fifty and regarded his tall, powerful visitor with a half-humorous, half-inquiring stare.

"Howdy, suh," said Morgan. "Are you Mr. Gamel?"

The youth at the sink glanced once over his shoulder, then went on with his task, shoulders stooped.

"Yes, son. What can I do for you?" The mineralogist swung in his swivel chair to confront Morgan as the tall man entered.

"I have some mineral samples I want you to look at and tell me what's in 'em."

"What sort of samples? Where did you get 'em?"

"Here they are. Where I got 'em is somethin' else again." Morgan smiled.

"Oh, of course, of course. I shouldn't have been nosy. I suppose you've discovered another Comstock Lode." Gamel was jovial. "If so, you're the millionth man who thought so. Let's see what you've got, son. It's probably iron pyrites, fool's gold. If so, you won't be the first man who's rushed in here with it."

The bright eyes watched as Morgan brought out the bagged samples he had taken off the range. With the sharp blade of his penknife, Gamel cut a string and spread out the cloth in which the greenish stuff lay. He didn't say a word, but opened all the others. Then he picked up a magnifying glass, shut one eye, and studied them carefully by the window light.

"What do you think, suh?" asked Morgan at last.

Gamel shook his head. "Impossible to say until I've made tests, my boy. It does look familiar, though."

"What would be your first guess, without committin' yourself?"

Gamel shrugged. "I'd say an arsenic combination at this point, but I tell you, I need to work on it. Where can I find you?"

"I'll be around, suh."

Morgan thought an explanation should be made to satisfy Gamel's natural curiosity as to why a waddy should be fetching in such ore. Gold or silver would be a different matter, for anybody might hope to cash in on the precious metals.

"You see, Mr. Gamel," he went on, "we've lost a bunch of cows who've licked up this crumblin' green stuff, and my boss sent me to ask you what to do."

"I understand. Come back at noon tomorrow."

"Can't you give me an answer this evenin'? I'll be glad to wait."

"I have a business engagement—must meet a man in fifteen minutes."

"I'll pay what you ask." Morgan brought out a roll of money and the bright eyes grew interested.

"Twenty-five dollars—in a d v a n c e," agreed Gamel. "I'll send my other client a note saying I'll be late. Do you want to wait or come back in an hour?"

"I'll stick around." Morgan peeled off the price and handed the money to the mineralogist.

"Sit over there." Gamel pointed to a chair at the end of the long laboratory table, and Morgan went to it and sat down. "Here's today's paper. The ink's still wet. There's been a lot of excitement on the range."

HE PASSED a four-page, poorly printed local newspaper to Morgan, who glanced at the headlines. One on the front page stared him in the face.

MASKED RIDER STRIKES AGAIN

Wayne Morgan read the story, a lurid, fictitious account, blaming every outlaw deed that had occurred on the range on the Masked Rider. It was undoubtedly from the facile pen of Counselor Fronce, and among other falsehoods the tale in the Riverside *Cowman* claimed that the Masked Rider had tried to hold up a party in the Wolf's Den the night of Morgan's narrow escape.

Gamel had scribbled a hasty note.

"Al," he said to the dishwasher, "deliver this right away to Mr. Oliphant."

The scrawny lad dried his hands on a stained towel and shuffled to the desk. Taking the note, he went out and disappeared down the street.

Gamel picked up several samples Morgan had brought in, carried them to the table and cleared a space. He emptied the contents of the cloths into a large mortar and with the pestle pulverized the greenish compound. He talked as he worked, mentioning the price of beef, the latest dancer at the Wolf's Den, and such pertinent matters. Morgan watched the slow grinding process.

Soon Al came back to his sink. Gamel paused, washed and dried his hands carefully, and winked at Morgan.

"If this is what I think it is," he said, "I don't want to swallow any."

The sun was now low over Riverside, slanting in the west windows. The clock on Gamel's wall said 5:16. Gamel picked up a glass beaker, stepped to the door to examine it in the better light. He rubbed the bottom with a testing finger and sniffed at it. He turned on Al, scowling.

"If you don't learn to get these clean, I'll scalp you, boy!" he said severely. "How many times do I have to tell you? Over and over, day after day! Chemically clean, not just so it would fool your sister. You young fool, you could ruin me!"

Gamel went to the sink, elbowed Al aside, and washed the beaker himself.

"Aw, I had it clean, Mr. Gamel," muttered Al defensively. "If they ain't kept covered, dust gets in."

"Cover 'em, then."

When Gamel had cleansed the vessel to his own satisfaction, he took it back to the table. Then he had to wash a large horn spoon, and when he had done that, he measured off a couple of ounces of a reagent from a bottle. This went into the beaker. Next he dipped the horn spoon into the pulverized ore sample in the mortar and bent over, staring into the solution as he sprinkled the greenish powder from the spoon into the reagent.

Wayne Morgan, too, watched with intense interest. He could see the grains as they hit the solution and underwent a change of coloration. They lost the greenish hue and became a dirty gray. Gamel nodded, muttering to himself as though satisfied.

"I could practically swear the stuff you fetched in is arsenious oxide, my boy," he said.

"Is that right? They use it to poison wolves and rats, I know. But what I've seen was white."

"It was pure, that's why," explained Gamel quickly. "You get all sorts of discoloration in the open air. Just wait until I try a pinch in the flame."

Whistling again, Gamel took the beaker to the sink.

"Rinse it carefully first," he ordered. "And don't get any in your stupid mouth, Al. It's rank poison."

He poured water into a tin basin, rinsed his hands and dried them. Then he made a quirly and offered the "makin's" to Morgan.

At the long table, Gamel began monkeying with an oil-fed burner with a hand-blower attached so a really hot flame could be whipped up and concentrated to a point.

"If we get a green color in the tip, we'll be sure it's arsenic," he announced.

A step at the door caused Wayne Morgan to swing that way. Two men pushed in, one with a cocked pistol in hand. Morgan was seated. He recognized the pair as two of the outlaws he had seen at the Wolf's Den and on the range.

His first flash was to have it out with them, for he could roll off his chair and use the table for cover. But then the back

door, a few feet from his other side, was kicked open and Knifenose Lichette leaped through, a sawed-off, double-barreled shotgun trained on Morgan.

CHAPTER X

Captured

PINNED from both sides, Morgan could not resist. Knifenose Lichette had a finger on the trigger and if he pulled, the buckshot would tear Morgan to pieces. There were more gunmen around, too, besides those who had first come in.

"Take his gun, Gamel," snarled Lichette. His sharp face was savage, his eyes glittering. He would willingly kill the man in the chair.

Morgan had his hands shoulder high.

"Don't kill him, not in here, anyway," begged Gamel nervously. "I don't want that, Lichette."

"Dry up. I'll kill him if he bats an eye."

Gamel gingerly reached out and drew the pistol from Morgan's holster. He offered the captive no chance to use his own thin body as a shield.

"Murph," ordered Lichette, "see if he's got another one inside his shirt."

One of the gunhands came over and patted Morgan, feeling the holstered Colt there. This he skillfully removed as well as the long knife in the waddy's belt sheath. The bulk of the bandaged shoulder puzzled him. He worked from the side, ripped Morgan's shirt off the shoulder, exposing the bandage.

Lichette watched, the shotgun steady.

"See what he's got in his pockets," he ordered.

The gunhand obeyed. He exclaimed in pleasure when he found the roll of cash, and was about to pocket it when Lichette snatched it away.

"I'll keep this," snapped Knifenose.

With fangs drawn, Wayne Morgan sat helpless under Lichette's guns. The outlaw chief was staring at him with dawning recognition.

"Say, I know you!" he cried, the end of his sharp snout wiggling in excitement. "I caught you headin' for the Circle F one day, didn't I?"

"Yeah, that's right, mister," said Morgan, in an aggrieved tone. "But I don't savvy what all this is about. I did you no harm when you covered me at the Circle F, and I haven't now."

"He fetched it in, as you can see for yourself," said Gamel, pointing to the mortar on the table.

One of the gunhands stalked over and looked intently at Morgan.

"Knifenose, I'll swear this cuss was out at the Star S last night! I seen him in the flashes, when Turk was shot down."

Morgan had to think fast. "That's right, too," he nodded. "I was there. I couldn't get me a ridin' job at Felton's, but the cowboys said maybe Sellers would take me on, so I rode over and the colonel hired me."

"You're a root-tootin' little explainer," said Lichette with sarcastic admiration.

"He paid me twenty-five dollars for a spot analysis, Lichette," put in Gamel.

"Explain that!" ordered Knifenose bitingly.

"I can," drawled Morgan. "Colonel Sellers lost some of his cows—they died from lickin' outcroppin's on his range. He told me to fetch some of the stuff here and see what it might be. Mr. Gamel claims it's arsenic."

Gamel scowled at him. "He seems to know a lot for an ordinary cowhand. Told me arsenious oxide is white, not green. He's sharper than he acts."

"Sellers ain't hirin' anybody." Lichette nodded. "We sent out two or three hands but the colonel wouldn't take 'em on."

Morgan had done his best, but it was hopeless. "I should have realized Tate would pin Gamel one way or another, right off," he thought. He had underestimated the fat chief. But he showed no sign of worry to his enemies.

LICHETTE was no fool, either, in his own way. He had to be a tough

fighter, and he needed a certain type of shrewdness to stay at the head of his killer band. He came over beside Morgan and, reaching out, ripped the bandage from the shoulder wound.

Wayne Morgan said nothing, holding himself bravely as Lichette carefully examined the injury.

"Where'd you get that?" he demanded.

"At the ranch," replied Morgan.

"Not in the scrap last night! It's not fresh enough. It's two, three days old!"

Lichette was working dangerously close. The wound in Morgan's shoulder could set him on the correct track, cause him to guess that Morgan might be the Masked Rider.

"I was cleanin' my gun and it went off," said Morgan, to divert the gunslinger.

A cold grin touched Knifenose's thin lips.

"You got an answer for everything!"

Suddenly his hand flicked out and he slashed Morgan alongside the head, rocking him in his chair. To resist would be to ask for a slug through the vitals, and Morgan set his jaw and waited.

"Tie his hands behind his back," commanded Lichette.

Knifenose's aides quickly complied and they were not gentle about it.

"The best you can say for yourself is you're one of Sellers' men," declared Lichette severely. "It looks to me like the colonel sent you in with that stuff to Gamel. Well, I'll get the truth in time, don't worry. . . Dan, look out the back way and see if it's all clear. We'll run him over to our place."

"Our place" proved to be a barnlike structure a few doors away. Lichette and his armed crew hurried the prisoner there, from the rear of Gamel's cabin. The trip consumed only a few seconds, and during it they were completely hidden from the plaza. It was a question whether Blue Hawk would see where they had taken Morgan. The Yaqui, spying from a distance as he had been told to, would have

[*Turn page*]

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observed the entrance of Lichette's gunslingers into Gamel's, but his sharp eyes could not penetrate inside the buildings.

A rawhide line was fastened to Morgan's wrists and at the other end to an upright post. He was allowed to sit on the dirt floor. There were small square windows high in the wooden walls, and blankets were spread about, as well as gear, showing that Lichette and his band used this place as a headquarters and for sleeping when in Riverside.

Hard eyes closely observed the captive. Knifenose sent off a messenger, and it was not long before Counselor Fronce came galloping in, slightly out of breath, and flushed.

The expansive Fronce wore his frock coat and fawn trousers. He prided himself on being an elegant dresser. The little goatee waggled as his face twitched nervously while he examined Morgan, and his dark eyes were unable to hold the prisoner's calm gaze for long.

"Well, my man, what have you been up to?" he demanded, in a blustering voice.

"Nothin', suh," replied Morgan coolly. "I was on an errand for my boss when these hombres grabbed me."

Knifenose Lichette kicked him. "He's a plain and fancy liar, Fronce. I can't make him out altogether. The day you bought the Circle F, this cuss comes ridin' along after you. We held him then and let him go afterwards, thinkin' he was just some fool waddy who blundered along. Then we see him at the Star S, fightin' Sellers' battle. Next, he sashays in to Gamel's with ore samples!"

"He's got a wound in that shoulder," observed Fronce.

"That's another thing. It couldn't have been last night, either, because it's older than that. He claims his gun went off accidental-like."

The counselor was puzzled, too, just as Lichette was. He put his tongue in his florid cheek. Then he turned and consulted in whispers with Lichette. Morgan heard Gamel's name mentioned but missed the gist of what was said. Finally Fronce nodded, saying:

"I'd better go tell him."

He glowered at the captive, swung and hurried out.

BEFORE long, Knifenose Lichette left the headquarters but before he went he gave strict orders about guarding the captive. A careful watch was kept, the armed gunhands never relaxing. The cord pulled up behind him, bit deep into Morgan's wrists. He asked for water but they only cursed him.

They gave him neither food nor drink as minutes dragged into hours, and night fell over Riverside. One of Lichette's men lighted an oil lantern and hung it on a hook from a rafter. Dimly, sounds of music, and men's voices, came from the center of the town.

Morgan wondered where Blue Hawk was. Had his comrade learned yet that he was a prisoner, and where he was being held? He couldn't be sure of anything, except that Blue Hawk would do everything possible, even offer his own life, to save his friend.

Then there was a bustle at the doorway, and Cachell Tate came in, followed by Fronce and Lichette.

The fat man wore a dark cloak and flat hat. His pudgy hands swung easily at his hips. He came over and stood there, studying the captive, his wet lips open, and his breath rasping. The wrinkles deepened around the narrowed, evil eyes.

"You ride for Colonel Abe Sellers?" he asked at last.

"Yes, suh," replied Morgan, the proper grievance in his voice. "And I don't savvy why I'm bein' held this way."

Tate didn't care about what he thought or what eventually happened to him. He was interested in his own affairs, and only considered Morgan because the cowboy had come into that orbit. Morgan could sense the icy, calculating nature of this ruthless man.

"What did Sellers think he had found, when he sent you to Mr. Gamel?" Tate demanded.

"I ain't sure. I was only obeyin' orders. The colonel gave me some little bags and

money and said run into town and see what Mr. Gamel had to say. I was s'posed to fetch back a written report."

Tate's pudgy hand rose and he stroked his jowls with thumb and forefinger. He was thinking it over.

"Lichette says you had quite a sum of money on you for a cowboy," he finally commented. "You've been wounded, too. Doesn't it seem queer that Sellers would pick a new employee, and one with an injury, to fetch in what he believed might be something valuable?"

Morgan shrugged. His hurt shoulder was still exposed in the yellow lantern light.

"Come on, what have you got to say for yourself?" prodded Cachell Tate.

"I'd tell you," answered Wayne Morgan, "but you folks won't believe me. I wasn't much account at the ranch as I was laid up, so the colonel sent me to town with those samples on account he said I was new around here and wasn't likely to be bothered. He's been havin' trouble, and I s'pose you hombres are it!"

"I told you he was a tiptop explainer, Mr. Tate!" cried Knifenose Lichette.

Tate moodily studied the powerful young fellow before him. But his mind was channeled along the line of what Abe Sellers might be doing, for again he asked:

"You don't know what Sellers thinks about the—about the arsenic you took to Gamel?"

"No, suh. I just did what my boss told me to do."

Tate sighed heavily, and straightened up.

CHAPTER XI

Arrows of Fate

CACHELL TATE gave Lichette a brief nod. Knifenose went to a large chest standing in a corner, opened the lid and brought out a black cloak, peaked black sombrero and a domino mask.

"You'll need to gag him out there," cautioned Tate. "He might call a warning to Sellers."

"Yes, suh. A gag won't show much in the dark and anyways they'll be excited. He's good and wide, that's a help. He'll cover our man behind him."

Lichette draped the cloak over Morgan's broad shoulders, tied on the mask and plunked the sombrero on his head. They stepped back to admire the view.

"Couldn't tell the sidewinder from the real Peruvian, Mr. Tate," said Knifenose, admiring his own handiwork. "It should draw out Sellers where we can down him."

"It's worth a stab," agreed Tate. "I don't like this new development—I mean, Sellers sending in those samples. It shows he's suspicious. Not only that, but we're losing time. We must finish up quickly, before Sellers brings in help and rouses the public against us. Run this fellow out there tonight, and take a dozen of the boys along. We'll go on enlisting and if you have bad luck and Sellers escapes again, we'll run off the full attack. We can't fail then."

"No, suh. I had word from Guiterrez. He'll be along with at least thirty men for me in the next day or two."

Helplessly bound, Wayne Morgan listened to the terrible plans that were being discussed before him. They were so sure he would never escape that they had no fear of his getting a chance to warn Sellers. And, thought Morgan, even if Sellers were warned he had only a handful of cowboys at the Star S to resist the stunning blow planned by Tate and Lichette. Such a force as the Guiterrez that Lichette had mentioned had guaranteed, added to the trained gunslingers commanded by Knifenose, must prove overwhelming. So far, they had only stabbed at the Star S, trying to pick off the colonel and his son. This strategy had proved highly successful at Felton's Circle F, and with outlaw bull-headedness, having struck a workable plan of operation, Lichette had stuck to it, repeating it.

But unless Lichette could deliver Sellers' scalp within the next twenty-four hours, Cachell Tate would switch and hit

with all his evil power. Wild killers would sweep down on the Star S, shooting all who dared oppose them. In such a strike, Red Billings and the other waddies would die along with their boss and his son. Kathy, broken and alone, might survive, but Tate would see to it how she disposed of the property her father left. She couldn't run the spread herself, and she would have no desire to.

And the very presence of the Masked Rider somewhere in the central mountains made Cachell Tate recklessly bold and cocksure, for he could blame everything on the black-clad outlaw. In his tortured imagination, Wayne Morgan could guess what the future headlines of the Riverside *Cowman* would say:

MASKED RIDER LEADS OUTLAW KILLERS AGAINST STAR S!

Something on that order. They would leave the ranch a bloody, smoldering ruin. Guiterrez would ride back to his mountain fastnesses and the Masked Rider would be dead, unable to vindicate himself or to wreak vengeance on Cachell Tate and his lieutenants. . . .

OUT at the Star S, a chunk of yellow moon hung low in the star-studded Texas sky. It was late and the outfit had turned in except for two sentries on night duty, guards who were always watching since the first attack on the ranch. The house windows were dark and a lone lantern guttered on the yard pole near the night corral.

Approaching the spread, Wayne Morgan sat uncomfortably on a raw-boned black—supposedly Midnight, the famed steed of the Masked Rider—for he was firmly secured to the saddle. His ankles were fastened to the tapped stirrups by rawhide lengths, and his bound wrists, numb from the tight cords, were pulled behind him, a restraining loop running under the cantle's bulge.

Lichette had approached the Star S with the utmost caution, and had pulled up well out from the ranch, keeping behind a wooded outcropping. A bandanna had been tied across Morgan's mouth and knotted behind his head, upon which Lichette had strapped a black sombrero. A domino mask covered the eyes of Wayne Morgan who was to be used as bait. A shapeless cloak hung over his body and flapped down the ribs of the mustang.

Knifenose's dozen heavily armed killers listened to his final orders.

"Now, boys, Shorty is goin' to ride behind this scum, savvy? Shorty will have holdin' loops in the black's rings so he can't bolt. And remember, Shorty, if anything goes sour, pour lead into the cuss. . . . Rob, you keep five men here back of Shorty, crawl in afoot, and get set with your rifles. I'm goin' around and cover the other arc, because I figure I'll get a better shot at Sellers from that angle after he's drawn outside. They'll all be watchin' this way. Pick off Sellers, above all. Shorty will down the colonel, if possible. He'll be the nearest, protected by this fool."

Lichette had worked it out carefully. The ranch guards would be quickly driven in. Sellers and his waddies would rush out at the alarm, and Knifenose expected to get the rancher in the excitement.

Desperately Wayne Morgan had counted on giving Sellers some sort of warning, if only with his last gasp, as they had come out fast on the road from Riverside, then hooked down toward the Star S. Now the final stalk had begun, and he could still see no way.

"Go to it, Shorty," Lichette said.

Knifenose, with his contingent, faded into the shadows, hurrying into position.

"Shorty" had the dangerous spot, but Lichette had hand-picked him for the perilous rôle as the Masked Rider's shadow. Shorty's face had been blacked to kill sheen and he wore dark garments. His mustang was black, too, but smaller than the tall horse which Morgan sat.

Not far away was the river, its banks lined with brush and taller growth which cast dense shadow. The buildings stood up the gentle slope from the stream, above

high-water mark as was prudent where spring melts from mountain fastnesses sometimes flooded the bottoms with scant warning. The dark area near the river offered a background of approach.

Shorty swung into saddle and Morgan heard him draw in a deep breath. Keeping close behind Morgan, Shorty urged along the two blacks.

Morgan fully expected to die, whether by enemy guns or by lead from the weapons of the men he had sought to protect. Sellers and Billings would not be able to distinguish him as a friend in the battle. They would naturally conclude he was another outlaw dressed as the Masked Rider.

They slowed, and Shorty guided Morgan's rangy black toward the buildings. A Star S rider, coming around the circuit, suddenly spied the moving black blob. He threw his carbine to his shoulder and sent a hasty shot. Morgan heard the whistle of it an inch from his head. Shorty fired a Colt past him and a couple of outlaw rifles crackled, the flashes marking the points where Rob's crew hugged the earth.

"Here they come!" bellowed the cowboy, spurting for the yard. "Star S, up and at 'em!"

Abe Sellers had given strict orders that as soon as the alarm had been called, his sentries must hurry for cover and not expose themselves unnecessarily.

Gunshots on the far side told that the second ranch guard had been engaged by Lichette.

"Sellers—Sellers!"

That was Shorty, bellowing in Morgan's ringing ear, deafening him with his powerful voice. One reason Shorty had been picked was because of his lung capacity.

DARK figures came rushing from the ranchhouse and the bunkhouse. Shorty kept shoving closer, the big Morgan, in black, acting as a living screen. The battle was joined and confused yells, staccato explosions rose in the night.

A gigantic wasp burred in the air close behind the Masked Rider. Morgan heard Shorty curse, and exclaim sharply:

"What in blue blazes was that!"

Then came an agonized grunt, and the gasping intake of punctured lungs. Shorty was trying to shriek but he could not. He was not shooting any more, either, although Abe Sellers had emerged from a side door into the yard.

But Wayne Morgan knew what those singing, vicious missiles were. They were arrows of fate, offering him a last, slim chance.

Shorty did not speak or move again. Morgan reacted swiftly, aware that a slug from one of the nearby riflemen could quickly end his life. The Star S was in position to defend themselves and was opening up, while Rob's outlaws were behind Morgan. He was so tightly bound that all he could use was knee pressure, and his black mustang was anchored to the dead Shorty's mount.

Disturbed by those menacing, zinging missiles, the powerful animals reared and fought the bit, snorting in alarm. The relaxing Shorty slid from his saddle. Morgan's strongly muscled legs helped direct the excited black as the mustang bolted, violently jerking Shorty's horse into line. With no rider, the other black came along as his bit was pulled.

The call of the mountain lion rose on the air, blood-curdling, threatening, and a gray ghost rider tore into the fray. Hoofs thudded as Blue Hawk attacked, driving to the rear of Rob's line of men. He rode with the wild abandon of the savage, trained before he could toddle to cling to the shaggy back of a wild mustang. A couple of Rob's killers were taking aim at the dark, moving form on the rangy black, slowed by the erratic movements of the unguided following animal.

Blue Hawk's feathered arrows disturbed them as the Yaqui streaked close behind their line. Screams joined the din, and dust began rising from the beating hoofs. Bullets from the Star S were zinging all around, narrowly missing Morgan.

Gagged, his hands secured behind him, his ankles tied to the stirrups, he still sought to reach the end of Rob's arc so he could swing the black and escape the crossfire. Blue Hawk was riding a parallel

course, with the survivors of Rob's bunch between the two horsemen.

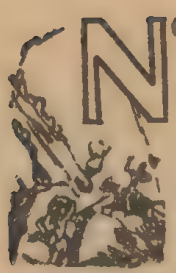
Just as Morgan thought he had made it safely, the rangy black suddenly was checked. So violent was the stop that Morgan decided the black's neck must have snapped. The horse under him was pulled around until his head and tail seemed to touch. He slipped and Morgan believed he was going to fall and roll over, which would mean the man fastened in the leather seat would be pinned, a helpless target, even if his leg was not broken.

Suffering though he was, his arms and legs aching and numb, his mouth dry as flannel from the gag and lack of water, yet Wayne Morgan could still think clearly, efficiently. His shoulder wound gave a sharp twinge as the terrific jerk came, then he was sitting the black, shaken but still whole. His mount had recovered his balance and stood with his head down, anchored to Shorty's mustang. The other horse was dead. He had been hit by a bullet intended for the black-clad man and had crashed, stopping the other black. Morgan's horse, heaving and snorting, was held where he was.

A slug ventilated the black hat tied on Morgan's head, just as the mountain lion call came again. Blue Hawk, shooting arrows as fast as another man could work a repeating rifle, raged through to his comrade. The Yaqui's long knife flashed in the dim light, cutting the rawhide cords holding Morgan's horse to the dead mass on the ground.

CHAPTER XII

The Plan



NO TIME was wasted by Blue Ha k. He snatched the reins of the black Wayne Morgan was riding, and they drove out of there. Enemy lead futilely sought them, for within a few hundred yards they reached the cover of brush along the river.

The Indian quickly began to free Morgan. He used the razor edge of his knife, cutting off the gag, then carefully removing the crisscrossed, murderously tight bonds at Morgan's wrists and ankles. He talked as he worked.

"Senor! I couldn't get to you sooner. I feared they would shoot you from behind."

Morgan's tongue was so swollen, his mouth so dry he could not speak. The blood returning to his hands and feet prickled, hurt him. But Blue Hawk, having freed him, knew what was needed. He uncorked his canteen and held it to Morgan's lips. The blessed water, brackish and warm though it was, soon gave the tortured man new life. The Yaqui began rubbing his trail companion's arms and legs to help restore circulation.

Shouts and the cracklings of carbines came from the Star S.

Morgan drew in a deep breath. He put back the domino mask, which Blue Hawk had removed with the gag.

"Come on, Blue Hawk!" he said fuzzily. "They're after Sellers and may get him yet. Let's break it up!"

Blue Hawk had a Colt and carbine ready for him. The Indian trailer had seen them running Wayne Morgan out of Riverside after dark, and had come after Lichette, watching his chance.

Up the gentle slope, Knifenose and his half dozen killers now lay flat, shooting at the Star S. The buildings had prevented them from seeing the swift rescue, or what had occurred when Blue Hawk had slashed Rob's bunch and pulled Morgan out of it. Rob was wounded, had an arrow in him. A man was screeching at the top of his voice, calling to Lichette for help, but the banging guns drowned him out.

Morgan and Blue Hawk picked up speed. They were at Lichette's rear as they broke from the black shadows of the trees and brush along the stream, and immediately attacked, firing at the long, dark shapes lying on the ground. A few of these dusters stung Lichette and his contingent from their position. They swung on the two riders, began running toward their mounts, shooting as they re-

treated. The survivors of Rob's crew were also making for their horses.

Lichette's plan had been ruined. The cursing outlaws jumped to saddle, harried at long range by Blue Hawk and Morgan. They were driven across the river, taking to the brush over there as they headed back for town.

"Make sure they're gone, Blue Hawk," Morgan instructed. "I'll wait here."

"*Si.*" The Yaqui rode off, following Lichette's dust.

Wayne Morgan stiffly dismounted, dropping the black's reins. His legs scarcely held him up, for he had not yet recovered from agony caused by the tight bonds with which he had been secured. When he reached the edge of the stream he drank again, from his cupped hands, and splashed water over his burning face and aching arms. This helped. The reserves of his great physical endurance had been taxed, but his strength was coming back.

He stretched out in the grass along the bank, the carbine by his hand, awaiting Blue Hawk. The hubbub at the ranch-house had stopped with Lichette's hasty withdrawal. A moving lantern blinked as a man carried it across the yard.

Morgan had no intention of sleeping. But he realized he must have dozed off for forty winks, because the quiet approach of Blue Hawk startled him awake.

The Yaqui dismounted and came to squat beside him. His dark eyes glowed with devotion.

"Senor," he murmured, "it's been hard! Were you again wounded?"

"No, Blue Hawk. Just fagged out, and I feel as if I'd been drawn through a knot-hole. I'm all right. I'm going up to the ranch. Wait for me here. Where's Midnight?"

"Safe in camp. I have your roan. I easily got him from town."

"*Bueno.* Pick him up, and soon we'll ride together."

MORGAN had removed the domino mask, and he shed the cheap black cloak Lichette had put on him. He ditched the punctured black sombrero as well. Mounting the black, he forded the river, across to the side where the ranch buildings stood.

Blue Hawk faded away in the darkness as his comrade slowly pushed his horse up the long slope.

Morgan could catch the voices in the yard. Out beyond, a couple of wounded outlaws, deserted by Lichette, were calling and begging for help. Suspecting a trap, however, the Star S had not yet ventured away from the buildings.

Morgan prudently dismounted and took cover before singing out to his friends.

"Star S!" he hailed. "Red! Colonel Sellers!"

The first answer was a hasty rifle bullet shrieking in the night air over his head. But he couldn't blame the waddies. After the tricks Knifenose Lichette had tried on them, such men were apt to shoot first and check up afterwards.

Morgan kept down, as the lanterns were hastily doused.

"Don't shoot!" he shouted. "It's Wayne Morgan, your friend!"

His voice echoed, ". . . your friend . . . your friend. . ."

They didn't fire again but they were still on the prod.

"Who'd you say it is?" a stentorian call demanded. Morgan thought it sounded like Billings.

"Morgan, Wayne Morgan! Hold your fire! I'm comin' in."

"Come in with your hands up till we make sure!" warned the voice.

He had nothing to fear from them, so he rose and raised his hands, leaving the carbine on a flat rock behind which he had hidden. Slowly he walked the couple of hundred yards of intervening space.

Red Billings stepped out, a rifle in one big hand, peering at him. Another cowboy raised the metal slide of a bull's-eye lantern and let the ray fall on Morgan's face.

"Sure enough, it's you!" exclaimed Red, his white teeth showing in a grin of welcome. "Some masked rider was after us again, and I reckon Lichette's bunch with him."

"Where's your boss?" inquired Morgan.

"Safe and sound in the house now," answered Billings. He was staring at the battered man before him. "What hit you—a stampedin' herd?"

"Just about," drawled Morgan. "But take me to the colonel and you'll hear all about it, Red."

"All right."

Billings warned the waddies to keep a sharp eye peeled in case Lichette and the masked horseman returned.

"Lichette's halfway to town by now," said Morgan. "And what you saw was me, Red. They dressed me up like the Masked Rider to fool you. You better send out a wagon and pick up those wounded gunslingers. Take their weapons and put the cusses under guard in your barn."

"Huh!" grunted Red. But Wayne Morgan was aces with the big cowboy, and he gave the orders.

Billings led the limping Morgan into the house. A lamp, turned low, burned on the center table in the living room. Abe Sellers and Kathy were there. The Colonel rose to greet Morgan, and in the yellow light they could see what a cruel beating their wandering waddy had taken.

"Lichette caught me, in Riverside," explained Wayne Morgan. "I had a tough time, suh, before I managed to escape."

"I'm going to get you some coffee," said Kathy, her quick pity aroused by Morgan's grim aspect. She hurried toward the kitchen to fix him a meal.

BILLINGS and Sellers listened carefully to his account.

"You've got some sort of valuable ore on your range, Colonel Sellers," declared Morgan. "I took samples and run into town, showed 'em to Gamel, the mineralogist there, and asked him to tell me what it is. He's in cahoots with Lichette and Cachell Tate, the man behind all your trouble. Gamel doublecrossed me and notified Lichette. They captured me and held me at their town headquarters till after dark, when they dressed me up like the Masked Rider and shoved me ahead, expectin' to pick you off."

"How in blue blazes did you ever break loose?" asked Billings, amazed.

"It so happened that that Indian I've been trailin' with for a while, the one you saw at camp, Red—was around. He cut in on the deal and held a handful of aces. It gave me a chance to ride for it." Morgan hurried on, because he did not care to be too explicit about Blue Hawk and the Masked Rider angle. "But now that I'm free, I've got to give you grave warnin', Colonel Sellers. Lichette, backed by Tate and all, aim to come for you and fast. They may be here late tomorrow night or at best the next evenin'—for Tate's afraid you'll find out what he's after and wreck his game."

"We'll hold 'em off," declared Sellers stoutly. "We've done it before."

Wayne Morgan shook his head. "Not this time, suh. I doubt it. Lichette has sent for an outlaw named Guiterrez, who commands thirty gunhands. You haven't enough men to stand off the combined forces. They'll burn or blast you out of your buildin's and finish you. Is there any place you can get help, pronto?"

Abe Sellers stroked his bearded chin, staring at the man who had brought him warning.

"There are a couple of small ranches west of here, who would give me a hand if I asked for it," he finally said. "But they hire only a few riders each and I hate to ask 'em to throw away their lives if it's as bad as you say, Morgan."

"It is, suh. We better switch to another idea I have. And that is, instead of waitin' here like sittin' ducks, we hit them first. It's a long, dangerous chance, but it's about the only one we've got."

"You mean go after 'em in town?"

"That's the ticket." Morgan nodded. "If we surprise 'em we might win, catch Tate and Lichette off-balance before they can join with Guiterrez."

Sellers thought it over. Kathy came in with a tray on which stood a pot of hot coffee, home-made bread and preserves, and cold sliced beef. It was the first food Morgan had tasted since before his capture by Lichette, and he did it full justice.

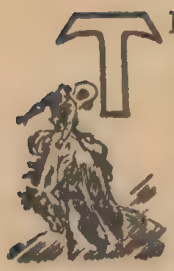
"Tell you what, Morgan," the Star S owner said at last. "I'll put myself in your hands so far as this fight goes."

"And I'm right with you, Morgan!" cried Red Billings, with deep satisfaction.

"Then here's what to do. Arm every man you've got to the teeth, Colonel. See they're rested so they'll be fresh tomorrow after dark. You'll have to leave your home unguarded for we need every gun, and more, to cope with Lichette, even if Guiterrez hasn't pulled in yet. Kathy must have a fast, saddled horse ready so she can scoot for it in case anybody shows up out here while yuh're gone. Don't let her take any unnecessary chances. If we're not back by the mornin' after, she'll understand—we're not comin' back."

CHAPTER XIII

Investigation



THE choice they must make was grim—whether to wait for Tate's overwhelming blow, or to drive against odds in a gamble to crush the enemy before he was poised for the final assault.

Sellers gave Morgan a brief nod, his jaw set.

"Where do you want us to assemble?" he asked, without waste of words. The Colonel had meant what he said about leaving the ranch's fate in Wayne Morgan's hands.

"Start tomorrow afternoon," Morgan said promptly, "but keep off the highway. Stick to the brush line along the river and stay out of sight as far as you can. We don't want Tate and Lichette spyin' you near town. A quarter-mile above Riverside is a hairpin bend, with thick woods coverin' the jut of the land. Get your men and horses in there and wait till dark."

"You won't be with us?" asked the colonel.

"No. I'm startin' now for the settlement to scout the enemy, and maybe find Gamel. There's plenty to be done and I can't tarry." Morgan paused, looking straight into the rancher's eyes. "Colonel Sellers," he said, "I must tell yuh this. I've met up with the Masked Rider."

"The Masked Rider!" Lines of doubt corrugated Colonel Sellers' brow, and Red Billings stared. "So he *is* around here!"

"Yes, suh," said Morgan. "He rode out from the woods while I was on my way to town and talked to me. He's mighty riled because Tate and Lichette have blamed these killin's around here on him. He told me he didn't kill Felton, and he never came for you. He swore it, and I believe him. It checks with what I found out, otherwise—that the men who have it in for you have used the Masked Rider as a screen to work behind."

"He's an outlaw!" Sellers said gravely. "Can you take his word for it?"

"Just as soon as I'd take my own," Morgan said solemnly.

Sellers thought it over. Then he nod-

[*Turn page*]

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ded. "All right. What's the deal?"

"The Masked Rider told me he wants to help you down Tate. He's done some checkin' on his own and savvies plenty. If we say so, he'll general the strike at Lichette and his boss. But every man you've got must be cautioned not to fire on the Masked Rider, or to try to pull him down in any way."

"That's fair enough," drawled Abe Sellers, and Red Billings was in full accord. "But how are we to savvy whether the black-clad hombre we'll see is the real Masked Rider or one of Lichette's scarecrows fixed up like him? That's what's been goin' on. You say so yourself."

"We'll take it for granted they won't be lookin' for a handful of cowboys to hit 'em in their stronghold, so there's no reason why they should have any men disguised. If they are expectin' us—why, it's like I said, we'll be ridin' into a death trap. So don't let yourself be seen comin' up. You'll get signals from the Masked Rider, and I give you my solemn word you can trust him as you do me. I may be hid in there, where I can do the most good."

"Bueno."

Sellers knew by now how much Morgan had done for the Star S, and was willing to do. The rancher was in a desperate position, hanging on by his nails, and Morgan's plan seemed to be his last and only chance.

Taking leave of the Star S, Wayne Morgan rode away and rejoined his Yaqui trail comrade down by the river. They rode off together across the rising range. Rocky outcroppings loomed black in the faint, silvery moonlight.

"Last chance!" Morgan said aloud, and Blue Hawk's sharp face turned toward his companion. "We haven't much time to spare, Blue Hawk. I'd like to have gone after 'em tonight, but there's not enough darkness left."

He told Blue Hawk how Sellers had agreed to his plan, and gave the Yaqui the details.

They reached the east-west highway and cantered along, always vigilant, toward the rough trail leading to their mountain camp, reaching the spot before the new dawn. Here, they could rest and make ready for the shaping battle. . . .

BEFORE the sun dropped behind the western mountains, Wayne Morgan arose, refreshed by a good sleep, and Blue Hawk had meat and coffee ready for him. Then Morgan strapped on the Masked Rider's black sombrero, and fastened the domino mask across his eyes. The long cape covered his stalwart body, while at his waist he buckled a black gun-rig.

Lichette had taken away the ordinary holster and pistols which Morgan had been wearing when he was surprised at Gamel's by his enemies, but Blue Hawk had brought him a spare set, necessary weapons they carried in their main gear, on the pinto pack-animal. He rolled up a flat-crowned Stetson and a tan belt and holster, stowing them in Midnight's saddle-bags just in case he might want to make a quick change from the Masked Rider to Wayne Morgan.

Midnight had been saddled, and the magnificent black stallion was fresh, eager to go. Blue Hawk hid the packs in the rocks so skillfully that not even another Indian could have found them. The hammerhead roan and the pinto were left in the mountain park behind the bivouac.

Blue Hawk, with a full quiver of long arrows and his bow, rode his gray mustang, as the Masked Rider on Midnight hit the trail for Riverside. After a short run they came to the beaten east-west road, and swung left on it, toward the settlement.

"Either we settle Tate's hash tonight or we get ours settled, Blue Hawk," murmured the Masked Rider.

He loomed huge, menacing, in that ebon outfit, and the sheen of the powerful black reflected the fading light of the late afternoon. Twice, warned by their own alert senses and by the actions of their trained mounts, they pulled off the highway to let other parties pass, so they would not be seen.

Each time it was a small party, men

they knew were not involved in the struggle—probably ranchers and cowboys from more distant spreads on their way home from town. Once a slow ranch wagon driven by an elderly Mexican rattled by, the body of the vehicle laden with supplies.

A mile out of Riverside, the two took to the woods on the heights overlooking the river valley where the settlement had been built. It was slower going, but safer, for they were now more likely to run into strangers, and folks from the town.

The sun was swollen and red behind them when they finally came to a fringe of trees, looking down a long slope into the settlement. It was close to suppertime and smoke floated from many chimneys. The town marshal was moving along the main street, around the plaza, lighting the street lanterns on their poles with a taper attached to a long stick. They could make out the Wolf's Den, Fronce's office, and Gamel's little shack close to the north terminus of the building line.

A single-tracked railway line ended at Riverside, useful in shipping cattle. Few passenger trains were run, however. As a rule a coach was hooked to a freight to carry the handful who might want to visit out-of-the-way places.

Blue Hawk grunted, pointing southeast. The Masked Rider turned. Faint stains showed in the darkening blue of the sky in that direction.

"A train," he muttered.

It was slowly approaching Riverside but it was still miles away, and between the terminus, about fifteen miles by track, was another hamlet. Uneasiness took hold of Morgan.

"Do you suppose Lichette's man, Guiterrez, could be riding that train with his gunhands, Blue Hawk?" he asked anxiously. "Maybe Lichette told him to hop it. Lichette could supply the Guiterrez outlaws with mounts."

AS SOON as the welcome blanket of night fell over the central mountain region, the Masked Rider and the Yaqui pushed down to the outskirts of the settlement. They dismounted in a patch of timber not far from the rear of Gamel's laboratory, which was unlighted. A lamp burned in Counselor Fronce's office, down the street. Music, the voices of men and women, came from the center of town.

The Masked Rider and the Yaqui moved silently in the darkness. Nobody glimpsed the stealthy figures as they came to the rear door of Gamel's adobe hut. It cast a black shadow into which they melted, and the black-clad man softly tried the latch of the back door. It lifted, but the door wouldn't open. It felt rather flimsy, though, and he put his shoulder to it and applied steady pressure. After a moment, the door gave, a couple of nails ripping from the wood, nails which had been hammered home from outside.

They waited, to make sure they had not been heard and that nobody was inside, though there was no light inside. Among their equipment was an oil-filled bull's-eye lantern, and the Masked Rider had brought this along for the purpose of investigating Gamel's place.

Blue Hawk followed him in, and they closed the door, stood listening for a moment. There was a strange odor, a smell which caught at their throats and lungs.

"Death!" the Yaqui muttered.

"That smells like quicklime, Blue Hawk!" said the Masked Rider.

He cupped a match in his big hand and lighted the bull's-eye. As the wick caught, the Masked Rider adjusted the slide, controlling the amount of light released. The narrowed beam swept around the storage room behind the laboratory, for this seemed to be what the chamber they were in was used for. Small kegs, sacks, boxes, large carboys, and stacks of bottles and junk filled it.

The masked man looked in a closet, which also was jammed with stuff of Gamel's—sacks and other containers of ores, worn, chemical-stained jackets and many other articles of scant value to anybody. In one corner, the light beam stopped for a moment on a cylindrical drum. In red letters, painted on the rounded side, they could read:

CaO—Quicklime. Danger. Poison!

The Masked Rider stepped over to it, glanced in. Save for a few white patches clinging to the metal insides, the drum was empty.

The odor still bothered them, but they were growing accustomed to it. The Masked Rider went into the laboratory, keeping the light covered, feeling his way along. He looked out a street window, over Gamel's desk, but saw nothing to alarm him. Blue Hawk joined him.

"Take some of that sacking, Blue Hawk, and cover the windows," he ordered. He did not want to have a light seen here by Lichette and his men.

The Yaqui set about the job. There were only four windows in the front, and a single one in the rear. There was plenty of old burlap and other cloth around, and in a few minutes Blue Hawk had finished.

The Masked Rider did not find any of the greenish ore he had brought in to the laboratory. He tried Gamel's desk next, and the constricted beam of his light touched a white sheet of paper lying under a chunk of quartz ore used as a paperweight. He read what was scrawled on it:

Al: I've gone away for a few days. Take time off. See you when I get back.

Gamel

The Masked Rider grunted. He went to the front door and tried it, but it was padlocked from outside. Perhaps Al had an extra key, since he was Gamel's employe.

CHAPTER XIV

Last Chance

HAWK had gone into the back room. The Masked Rider heard some faint sounds as the Yaqui scratched around. He, himself, began checking a large notebook of Gamel's. It had an official look and inside were carefully tabulated records of analyses and experiments made by the mineralogist. A scientist, even though his lab seemed untidy and cluttered, had to maintain proper data.

He reached a double page and the notations held his deepest interest. As he was checking back, Blue Hawk came silently up behind him, his moccasins making not the slightest noise.

"Senor, you come!"

The black-clad searcher knew that the Yaqui must have found something startling. He picked up the bull's-eye lantern and trailed the Indian to the rear of the place.

The light showed a trap-door which the Indian had lifted in the rough flooring and propped back. There was no cellar, but under the shack was an air space, enclosed by the adobe brick foundation. The Masked Rider stepped closer and glanced through the opening. He could see a six-foot-long, wide trench filled with a whitish mass. It was the source of the odor.

"It's plain enough, Hawk," growled the man in the mask, after a minute. "That's what's left of Gamel. Lichette didn't trust him in the pinch."

The Yaqui nodded stoically, and settled the trap back in place.

It might be, the Masked Rider was thinking, that after doublecrossing Wayne Morgan and betraying him to Lichette, Gamel had demanded more of a cut, or he might have shown signs of weakening. At any rate, he had served his purpose, and one mineralogist had been disposed of.

"Come on," ordered the Masked Rider. "Here we go, Hawk!"

Making certain the way was clear, they left Gamel's shack by the back door, carefully closing it after them. The masked man kept listening for the approach of that night train, but so far it had not pulled in.

They went to the back of the stables, an uneven line of rickety structures behind the main buildings. Not far off stood the barnlike place where Lichette's band was quartered. The windows were lighted, and the Masked Rider began to steal toward one on the darker side, after signaling Blue Hawk to cover him. He

chanced a quick look over the low sill. About fifty per cent of Lichette's gunhands were in there, some playing cards and drinking, others lounging around. A couple were working on their saddles or cleaning their weapons. Morgan did not see Knifenose.

The Masked Rider was satisfied with what he saw. It was time to find Abe Sellers and the few but doughty fighting men the rancher had brought from the Star S.

Creeping away, the black-clad avenger found Blue Hawk where he had left him.

"Stick near here and watch, Hawk," he whispered. "I'm going for our fighting forces."

"*Si.*"

The Masked Rider hurried to the woods where he had left Midnight, took to his saddle, and circled around the north end of Riverside. Fording the river, he rode toward the hairpin bend where he had told Sellers to wait.

He slowed and grew more than usually alert as he neared the point. The woods were dense, black as ink. He essayed a faint owlhoot. After a brief pause, he heard an answer, and headed for the spot.

"Masked Rider! Is Wayne Morgan around?"

That was Red Billings. The masked man recognized the waddy's eager young voice. Then the huge cowboy stepped out into the moonlight in front of the tree and brush wall.

"Follow me, and obey my commands!" The Masked Rider's voice was deep and resonant, far different from the easy Southwest drawl of Wayne Morgan. "Mount your men, sir."

They could see the majestic, black-clad form on the giant black stallion. Men's hearts thrilled at sight of the Masked Rider. And from all Wayne Morgan had told them, they knew they could trust this mysterious rider, could safely place their fate in his hands.

SOON they had brought out their rested horses, and were taking to saddle. The Masked Rider took the lead, a gauntleted hand raised, sweeping forward in the order to advance. He led them back the way he had come. Abe Sellers was a few paces behind him, then came Billings and the other armed cowboys.

They kept quiet, but each man felt the tension, the sensation of wonder which invariably seizes men about to go into battle. Each couldn't help wondering if he would come out of it alive, and, what was more important to brave natures, whether he would prove his courage in the estimation of his friends.

The Masked Rider was an imposing presence. Those men in his wake felt his cool strength and took comfort in it, for they realized they were being led by a staunch commander and fighting expert.

He circled to the north of Riverside and came up behind the dark patch of woods, as he and Blue Hawk had done earlier that evening. Here he dismounted his crew. He had to post one cowboy, who was disappointed at being left out of the main scrap, to hold the bunched reins and keep the mustangs quiet. That was a vital assignment.

At the other edge of the woods, the Masked Rider said:

"Wait!"

They strained their eyes, trying to follow the vague figure as it melted away past the stables down the line. But it slipped out of sight as the masked man kept his rendezvous.

"Senor!" whispered Blue Hawk. The Yaqui was where the Masked Rider had left him. "Lichette is in there, and half his men."

"*Bueno!* This is it, Hawk! When we've cleaned up here we must hurry to the Wolf Den's and scoop up as many more as we can. Hide here, watch that front door into Lichette's headquarters. Cover me when I go in."

He left the Indian, to slip back to his waiting men, but in a couple of minutes he returned, with Sellers, Red Billings and the other Star S cowboys tiptoeing in single file after him, their carbines held at the ready. Sellers came up beside him when he crouched at the corner of a

stable. They could see past the corner, see the lighted windows of the barnlike structure a few paces away. Its front door stood wide.

"I'm going to jump through that door, Colonel," said the Masked Rider. "When you see me inside, rush for those windows and stick your rifles through. You can command everybody in the place."

Silently watchful, Blue Hawk was lying a short distance away, but none of the excited cowboys realized that the Yaqui was present.

The Masked Rider moved lightly across the street, turned down the side of the building where the open door cast a yellow rectangle into the gloom. His heavy black guns were holstered, but ready. The domino mask showed only his piercing eyes, and the black sombrero set firmly on his head. His black cloak was drawn about him.

This terrifying, massive figure suddenly hulked in that doorway, all but filling it. Eight or ten of Lichette's gunhands were there, still occupied with their card playing or working on gear. Knifenose himself was standing with his back to the entrance, one hand against the wooden wall, talking to one of his gang. That man was facing the door, and into his range of vision popped the black-clad man.

"Loo-ook!"

At the startled cry, Knifenose Lichette whirled.

"The Masked Rider!" he shrieked.

He was quick, in thought as well as action, and he knew what this meant. It meant death unless he could shoot first.

"You're under arrest, Lichette," called the Masked Rider sharply.

But Lichette wasn't wasting what breaths of time he might have left. He had dropped, snarling, his sharp nose twitching. His hand was only a brownish-white blur as it flashed to his Colt. The bony killer's gun cleared leather, rising to pin the tall man in the mask.

LICHETTE was faster than any of his outlaw band. In the flick of an eye he made his play. The Masked Rider was just inside the door, facing him near the front of the room. All the men were going for their weapons.

Startling explosions roared abruptly, echoing from the walls. As the astounded gunhands stared, they saw that the heavy black revolver had come into the Masked Rider's steady hand, that it was aimed straight at Lichette as it belched fire and metal. Lichette shuddered. The Masked Rider held his stance. Then Knifenose's knees collapsed and he went down, his gun arm stretched helplessly on the dirt floor.

Lichette's men felt icy dread at sight of such shooting. They saw the black pistol sweeping them.

"No!" one bandit yelped. "Don't shoot!"

"Reach!"

Colonel Abe Sellers' head and shoulders filled a side window, and his carbine was aimed.

"Drop it!"

Red Billings was in another window, gun held steady.

The bandits could see other carbine muzzles surrounding them on all sides. They were pinned in the light, and could be shot down by those men outside, without a chance to fight. And Lichette's death broke their spirit, their fear of the Masked Rider intensified. Only one, panicked at the thought of the noose awaiting him in another Texas town, kept digging for his Colt. Red Billings put a slug through his arm, and that ended the resistance at Lichette's outlaw headquarters.

A train whistled, *"Whew—whew!"* The Masked Rider jumped. It was almost at the Riverside station! On it must be Guitierrez and his powerful band, coming to the aid of Cachell Tate.

"Scoop them up fast, Colonel Sellers," he ordered hurriedly. "Leave two men on guard. Hustle up. Then get down to the Wolf's Den and grab the rest of Lichette's bunch. I'll see you."

He swung and bounded through the door. Blue Hawk was watching for his signal and hurriedly joined him.

"Find Tate, Blue Hawk, find Tate! I've got to catch him fast. I'm going to pick

up Midnight."

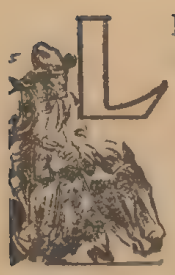
"Si." The Yaqui glided off, his bow and arrows riding on his back.

The Masked Rider trotted back to the woods, where the anxious horse holder waited. The cowboy had heard the quick shots, and was on tenterhooks.

"It's all right!" the Masked Rider quickly explained to him. "We've won the first round!"

CHAPTER XV

Trail's End



LEAPING to saddle, the Masked Rider cut from the trees, and went galloping down the main street.

The mountain lion signal drew him to a halt near Counselor Fronce's office, where a light shone. Blue Hawk was waiting for him there.

"Senor Tate is not in his quarters," reported the Indian. "So I came here."

Curious citizens had been drawn out into the street at the sound of the first shots, but when a few more explosions roared out around the Wolf's Den, attention was drawn that way, so this part of the street was now deserted.

The Masked Rider threw himself from his hull and hit the low porch in front of Fronce's office. The window was open and he looked in, seeing the florid-faced attorney behind his desk, his back to the rear wall. Fronce looked worried, and his head was cocked as he listened for further sounds of battle in town. It might be only a drunken brawl, but it could be trouble into which he would be drawn.

The Masked Rider pushed the door open. Fronce gasped and fell back in his seat at sight of the black-clad man.

"You!" he cried, his voice shaky. "Wh—what do you want?"

"Where's Tate?" snapped the Masked Rider. "Pronto!"

"I—I have no idea."

"You're lying!"

The Masked Rider had no gun in his grip as he took a step toward the desk, but Fronce, a physical coward, panicked as such men usually do. The bulk of the desk concealed what he was doing until he whipped up a snub-nosed revolver. Something sang in the air. Fronce screamed in agony. The pistol fell from his fingers, for his hand was pinned to the wall by a long, quivering arrow. Blue Hawk had fired through the window.

Fronce was finished, licked.

"Don't kill me!" he moaned.

"Where's Tate?" repeated the Masked Rider.

"At—at the station."

"To meet Guiterrez?"

"Yes," whimpered Fronce.

The Masked Rider swung to say coolly to the open window:

"Put the next one through his heart if he leaves his chair."

Fronce shuddered. "I give you my word of honor not to move!" he squealed. Then he passed out, slumping in his seat.

The Masked Rider ran outside, jumped to saddle. Blue Hawk loped along with him, holding to a stirrup, as the masked man rushed to pick up Sellers and his men.

Red Billings came along, herding four cowed captives before him, taking them to the outlaw headquarters up the street. Blue Hawk ducked.

"Hey, we got more of 'em!" sang out Billings.

"Put them under guard and bring the colonel and as many men as you can to the railroad station," ordered the Masked Rider.

He moved on, with Blue Hawk. The train was just pulling in, the brakes screeching on the steel wheels as it neared the end of the line. A couple of lamps in the little shack used as a passenger waiting room gave light. Further down were cattle pens and a loading chute.

The Masked Rider dismounted and trotted toward the wooden platform, looking for his man. Suddenly he saw the obese figure. Tate was in the shadow, leaning against the front of the station in the shadow.

As the masked man hit the shaky boarding, his weight making it squeak, Tate turned and saw the black-clad figure within six feet of him. The fat man showed astonishing speed. The faint rays from a lamp glinted on the nickel-plated pistol he whipped from his side pocket, thrusting his pudgy hand out for the shot.

Tate knew instantly, just as Lichette had known, that this was the real Masked Rider, the man they had so foully used. The fat man's breathing rasped in his pulsing throat. He gave a savage snarl of hate.

Tate's bullet clipped the Masked Rider's fluttering cape and on the echo came the blast of the Robin Hood outlaw's black Colt. Tate did not go down. He seemed solid as a rock, and the Masked Rider threw a second leaden slug into him.

YET the first had been enough. Tate fell against the station wall and slid to the boards.

The train ground to a stop, the dinky engine huffing and puffing, this noise drowning out the shots. The bulge of the station hid the scene from the windows of the passenger coach at the rear of the cattle cars.

Red Billings, Abe Sellers and Star S cowboys ran up.

"Get into that passenger car and cover those gunslingers before they unload, Colonel Sellers," ordered the Masked Rider. "Ask for Guiterrez. Say Lichette sent you. When you have them all rounded up, hustle to Fronce's office."

Sellers moved fast, with the masked man trailing to make sure all went well. A few passengers walked up the platform, carrying baggage. They were citizens, or salesmen arriving in Riverside, and the Masked Rider stayed out of their sight.

Waiting tensely, he heard Sellers sing out.

"Guiterrez!"

Then the reply, as a chunky man in a peaked hat and velvet jumped off the high step.

"Lichette told me to meet you," the colonel said. Then, as the cowboys hurried into position, Sellers ordered: "Up with your hands! You won't be hurt if you obey orders. I intend to ship you back where you came from."

The Masked Rider turned away, relief in his heart. They had defeated a greatly superior enemy by strategy, by striking at the separated portions of Tate's crew just before Tate was ready. He faded away in the darkness. . . .

Blue Hawk had taken Midnight away, and in the black stallion's saddle-bags were stuffed the black cape and gunbelts, the domino mask and sombrero worn by the Masked Rider.

It was the wandering waddy, Wayne Morgan, who met Abe Sellers and Red Billings at Fronce's office fifteen minutes after the Masked Rider had left the station.

"Why, howdy, Morgan!" Sellers beamed as he thrust out his hand. "Say, that Masked Rider hombre was terrific! We've won! We got 'em under guard, includin' that new passel Guiterrez fetched in. In the nick, too. Lichette and Tate are goners. I reckon our trouble's over now."

"I reckon, suh," drawled Morgan. "I was around, and did what I could."

Sellers suddenly noticed the collapsed Fronce, almost out of sight behind the desk. The arrow still pinned his hand to the wall.

"Well, look at that!" exclaimed Sellers, going over to the man. "An Indian arrow! Say, those gunhands of Lichette's had the same kind stickin' in their hides!"

Red Billings was staring curiously at Wayne Morgan. The big waddy seemed about to say something. He had seen Blue Hawk up in the mountain camp and there were several other coincidences to explain. Any minute now, Red might hit the right solution, and realize that Morgan and the Masked Rider must be one and the same.

"Give me a hand, Red," snapped Morgan.

They broke the arrow and released the lawyer's hand. Fronce moaned, and sank down. But he was not badly hurt. Morgan found a flask of whisky in the top drawer

of the desk and poured a slug through the trembling lips.

Fronce came to, shaking with dread, but now the others ignored him, with more important matters in mind.

"Here's what I found out, Colonel Sellers," said Wayne Morgan. "And the counselor here will verify what I've got to say. I'm sure of it. Right, Mr. Fronce? You in a truth-tellin' mood?"

"Yes, yes," groaned Fronce. "I'm sick of the whole game."

"Tate and Lichette have cashed in their chips, Fronce," went on Morgan. "We savvy what Tate wanted. I found out by readin' Gamel's records, for one thing."

AT MENTION of the dead mineralogist, Fronce shivered again and looked more worried.

"There's rich ore all under your range, Colonel Sellers," Wayne Morgan gravely explained. "Chalcocite and malachite too."

"What in tarnation is that?" demanded Billings.

"The best of copper ores. That's what those greenish outcroppin's are chiefly. The air tarnishes it some. The salts are poisonous to cattle and I guess maybe there's some arsenic in the surface veins, too, which accounts for your dead cows." He turned and frowned at the counselor, who started guiltily. "That right, Fronce?"

Fronce nodded. "Yes. And it was all Tate's idea. He was a mighty slick city promoter. He forced me into the scheme. The deposits run under the Star S and onto the land Felton owned. Not only that, but the coal was to be used in refining the ore. Plenty of fuel is required, and water as well. And with the slopes, the mill could be gravity-fed."

"A perfect combination, on your range, Colonel Sellers," nodded Morgan. "A short connection to the railroad in town would have completed the picture, from Tate's point of view. To get that land, he killed Felton and tried for you. . . ."

The town marshal, who was honest, if not too bright, helped Sellers lock up the prisoners in his jail, and a couple of guards were set. Tate's power had been smashed. The entire crowd retired to the Wolf's Den for a round of drinks, then Wayne Morgan held out his hand to Sellers.

"I heard of a job in the next county, suh, and I'm goin' to head that way."

"Oh, no you're not!" cried the colonel. "You're stayin' right with us, Morgan! You've got a job with me as long as I live. I'm goin' share that copper money with Billings, you and my other boys. Savvy?"

Billings nodded, grinning at Morgan. "Don't let him go, Boss," he said. "Maybe we'll need the Masked Rider's help again."

"The Masked Rider is leavin' these parts, I know for a fact," said Morgan gravely. "He told me so."

After a time he was able to slip outside, leaving the others at the bar.

Blue Hawk was not far away, waiting for him, and soon the two were on the highway, headed for their bivouac to pick up the rest of their belongings.

Then they would move on, restlessly. Home would be wherever they camped, in their constant seeking to help the oppressed.

COMING UP NEXT ISSUE!

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LAND PIRATES OF WAGON GAP

A Masked Rider Novel of Railroads, Rogues and Rustlers

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

Shay snatched the rifle out of Lowe's grasp and hit him with the butt of the Colt

All in the Day's Work

By ANDREW BRONSON

Line camp tasks were dull—till Vern Newman met an owlhoot!

IT WAS a strange, dismal sort of a night, a night to make a man uneasy without quite knowing why. Ben Lowe stood in the open doorway of the Circle N line camp cabin gazing somberly out into the darkness. He rubbed a hand over the stubble of beard on his lean face, wondering why he hadn't bothered to shave for five days.

"I don't like this line camp work," Vern Newman said from inside the cabin. "It is much too dull if you ask me."

Lowe didn't answer or even turn his head. For an instant a bitter, unreasoning anger swept over him, but he fought against it. The kid's attitude was growing more and more annoying with each passing day. Always beefing about the monotony of the job, and letting the older man do most of the work when it came to hunting strays, getting cattle out of the bogs in wet weather or mending the line fence.

It seemed to Ben Lowe that he was again hearing the Old Man's words as Mark Newman talked to the eight seasoned cowboys in his Circle N outfit that morning in June nearly two months ago.

"It doesn't matter a hoot that Vern is my son," Mark Newman said. "He's going to work for me this summer as a cowboy, and for wages just like the rest of you are getting. I want you all to treat him as a regular hand and show him no favors. After all Vern is twenty. I reckon football and all that has made him tough enough for a good day's work now he is home from college for the summer."

"All right, Boss," John Knight, the old foreman said. "Reckon Vern will make a hand when he learns the ropes."

"A top-hand," Vern said, standing proudly beside his father in the range clothes he had just bought, a brand-new Colt .45 in the holster on his right hip. "Don't forget I was born and raised on the Circle N until I went East to school."

Ben Lowe had stood back with some of

the other men listening, and there was something in the way Vern Newman talked that made him wonder. The boy sounded as though, even if the men of the outfit had orders to disregard his being the son of the boss, he wasn't going to forget it.

Lowe was a new member of the outfit. He had only been working for the Circle N a few weeks when Newman's only son had returned home from college. Lowe was an orphan who had been working for cow outfits ever since he was fourteen. Now at thirty-two he was a real top-hand.

Until they both had been assigned to line camp duty over at the north end of the Circle N range Lowe hadn't paid much attention to Vern Newman. The boy had worked mostly with some of the other members of the outfit, and had obeyed the foreman's orders. The boss had told John Knight to treat Vern as he would any other member of the outfit and the foreman had done so.

But during the two weeks Lowe and Vern had been at the line camp the boy had made it plain that he wasn't taking any orders from a man who was just another waddy in the outfit. Lowe reached the point where he did most of the work without even asking Vern to help him.

"Somebody coming," Lowe said as he stood in the doorway of the cabin. "I hear the hoofbeats of a horse."

"Good," said Vern. "Maybe John is sending somebody else up here to take over. I hope so. I'm sure sick of this place."

LOWE turned and looked at him. Vern Newman stood there in the light of the oil lamp, big for his age. He wore leather chaps over his levis, an open vest, gray flannel shirt and a Stetson that would have cost Lowe two month's pay.

"I hope so, too," Lowe said. "I'm getting right sick of your beefing about this line camp job, Vern. Trouble with you is that you figure every day should be the Fourth of July with fireworks."

"And this is August," Vern said in a strange sort of voice. "Maybe if—"

"Somebody riding into the clearing," Lowe interrupted, turning to the door. "I'm going to see who it is."

He stepped out into the shadows of the night. The wind was cool and damp as it blew against his face and hair, for he wore no hat. The big horse seemed like some grotesque creature as it came toward him across the clearing. Then as it drew nearer Lowe saw there was no one in the saddle.

"That's strange," Vern said from behind Lowe. "A riderless horse."

"It could mean trouble," Lowe said.

The horse halted and stood motionless, waiting. The bay's ears went back as Lowe struck a match and examined the saddle with the light of the tiny flame. Vern stood nearby watching him. "What are you looking for, Ben?" the boy asked.

"Blood," Lowe said, noticing the way the bay's reins were wrapped around the horn. "Hombre who rode this horse could have been drygulched, though I doubt it now."

"Why?" Verne asked, moving closer and staring at the horse. "What makes you doubt it, Ben?"

"If he had been shot out of the saddle he wouldn't have had time to wrap his reins around the horn," Lowe said.

"Stay right where you are, and don't turn around," said a heavy voice behind Lowe and Vern. "I've got you covered."

"Nice trick," Lowe said without turning, "sending in your riderless horse to toll us out."

"You're smart," said the man behind him. "Remember you both will live longer if you stand still."

A hand yanked the gun out of Lowe's holster and tossed it aside. The night grew brighter as the moon sailed out from behind a bank of clouds. The hand grabbed Vern's gun out of leather and flung it some distance away on the grass.

"You won't get much money if this is a holdup," Vern said.

He swung around defiantly. Lowe was forced to admit the boy had nerve. Lowe also turned. He stared at a big man dressed in range clothes who stood covering them.

"It's Carl Shay," Vern said. "He's wanted for murder and robbery. I saw his name and picture on a reward notice tacked up on the wall of the post office just a day or so ago and remember his face."

"Which is too bad for you," Shay said. "Feller who remembers that well just ain't safe to have around." He glared at Vern. "What's your name?"

"Vern Newman," said the boy.

"Newman," the outlaw said thoughtfully. "Any relation to Mark Newman who owns the Circle N?"

"His son," Vern said proudly.

"Son, eh," said Shay. "Always heard that Mark Newman set a heap of store in his boy. Might even be worth a lot of money to him to know his son was alive and well."

"You got something there, Shay," Lowe said. "Though I never thought of it before. The boss is sure a rich man."

SHAY looked closer at Lowe. In the moonlight, with five days' growth of beard on his face the cowboy looked tough and hard. Lowe deliberately winked and Shay saw it. Vern stood silently watching and listening.

"What's your name?" Shay asked Lowe.

"Ben Lowe," Lowe said. "Now."

"Like that, huh?" Shay chuckled. "Sometimes a hombre figures its smart to change his name. How long have you been working for the Circle N?"

"Just a few months," Lowe said.

"And before that?" demanded Shay.

"Unhuh," Lowe said drily.

"Might be that two men could handle what I've got in mind better than one," Shay said with a quick glance at the boy. "And it could pay well."

"Better than a cowhand's wages, I reckon," Lowe said.

"I know what you two are planning," Vern snapped in a sudden burst of anger. "You are going to kidnap me and hold me for ransom."

"The kid is a good guesser," Shay said.

"No, I'm not," Vern said bitterly. "I thought Ben Lowe was one of the best men in the Circle N outfit—but I made a bad mistake about that! I've hated this line camp job because he didn't ask me to help him with the work, didn't even order me to do it. The other men figured I could do my share, but not Ben Lowe. I know why now—because he's a sneak who would side the first outlaw who comes along!"

"The kid seems to know you right well, Lowe," Shay said as Vern lapsed into silence. "You sound like the sort of man I can use. Saddle up a couple of horses and let's go."

"All right," Lowe said. "But where are we going?"

"I've got a hideout back in the hills that isn't easy to find," said Shay. "We'll take the kid there and then find a way to get a note to his old man."

"How much ransom you aim to ask for?" demanded Lowe, glancing at the rifle in the saddle boot on Shay's bay.

"Twenty thousand dollars should be about right," Shay said. "Ten for me."

"My father hasn't that much money in ready cash," Vern protested. "And I doubt that he could raise it."

"He better had, or it will be too bad for you," Shay said grimly. "And do it fast. With a five thousand dollar reward for my capture I sure don't aim to stick around here long. Go on, Lowe, get them horses!"

Lowe headed for the corral near the shack where stock was kept in extremely bad weather. As he did so he circled around the bay. The instant the horse was between him and Shay he whirled and snatched the outlaw's rifle out of the saddle boot.

"Drop your gun, Shay!" Lowe snapped, standing behind the bay and covering the outlaw with the rifle. "I've changed my mind about siding you."

"Like that, eh?" Shay dropped his gun to the ground. "Reckon I was a fool to take a chance on you, Lowe."

Vern Newman stood watching both men as though unable to believe what had happened. Lowe stepped out from behind the horse and advanced toward Shay.

"I always believe in being loyal to the outfit I work for," Lowe said as he came closer. "The boss wouldn't take kindly to the idea of his son being kidnaped. Newman is funny that way."

Shay fumbled with the front of his shirt. He lunged forward as his right hand came out from inside the shirt holding a Colt by the barrel. He snatched the rifle out of Lowe's grasp with his left hand, at the same time the butt of the Colt caught Lowe a glancing blow on the head.

Vern Newman suddenly came alive. He made a flying leap and yanked the rifle out of Shay's hand, but the outlaw whirled, the Colt in his hand ready for action.

"Drop that rifle, kid," he snapped. "Do it quick, if you want to keep on living."

Vern dropped the rifle and just stood there. Lowe staggered around like a drunken man and finally fell to the ground.

Shay moved around so that he could still cover Vern and still see Lowe. "Try to double-cross me, will he," Shay snarled, glaring at the still figure on the ground. "That hombre isn't a bit of use to me alive so I might as well get rid of him for good."

"You mean you are going to kill him while he is unconscious?" Vern demanded.

"That's right," Shay said.

He raised the Colt in his hand. At the same time Lowe moved. The gun that had appeared in his fingers as though by magic roared before the outlaw could fire. Shay staggered back as the bullet got him in the right shoulder. His gun fell.

Lowe got to his feet, holding the gun. "Looks like we caught us an outlaw, Vern," he said. "Like I said before, the old man wouldn't take kindly to you being kidnaped." Lowe grinned. "But I reckon he won't object to you and me splitting that five thousand dollar reward for Carl Shay's capture."

"You're going to split the reward money with me?" Vern demanded dazedly.

"Of course," said Lowe. "You tried your best to side me when it came to a showdown, Vern. Good thing I spotted one of those guns Shay took off us and tossed around so carelessly. I managed to fall just where that gun was lying in the grass."

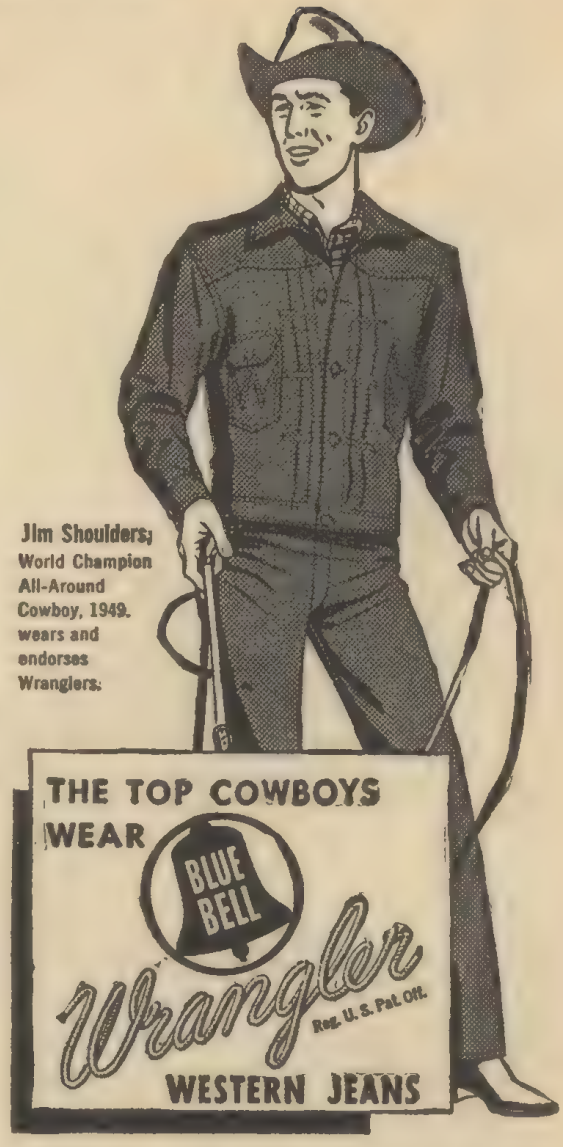
"Aw, quit talking and get me to a doctor," moaned Shay. "This shoulder hurts plenty."

"And I've been kicking about it being dull around here," said Vern. "Guess I didn't know when I was well off."

"It's all in the day's work," Lowe said. "Go saddle up a couple of horses so we can take Shay in to town."

"Coming right up," said Vern.

Lowe smiled as the boy hurried away. Give him a little more time and experience and the boss' son would make a real hand. It was all in the day's work.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Wild Hills MONARCH

Acheeta sunk her fiendish talons deep into Tahk's hide

By HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

A POWERFUL wild stallion scream was caught by the grim faces of the lower Shoshones and hurled back in penetrating echoes.

Tahk, the stallion, reared and struck like lightning at the man creature straddling the top rail of the trap corral.

Savage fury flashed from the handsome young blood-bay wildling's eyes as the man whipped to one side. Tahk crashed heavily into the hard rails. The soapy lather on his chest was tinged with blood-stain.

It was the tang of his blood, blended

An Untamed Stallion Battles for Survival and Power!

with that dread scent of man that lashed Tahk's fury to a killer pitch.

He was the wildling son of the great *Notwe*, the king stallion which, according to Indian legend, was the father of all the wild horse creatures.

Tahk lacked the full wisdom of his great, departed sire. He had in his youth been lured down to this trap by man-laid bait that was irresistible.

But now he fought with all his great power—the power of his terrible hoofs—spurred to action by the combined forces of fear and hatred.

The man, Wildhorse Foley, made a sudden upward lunge to clear the toprail as Tahk reared and struck.

Foley yelled as a hoof struck him a glancing blow midway up his right thigh. Fortunately the hoof blow helped him over the rail.

He dropped heavily to the ground outside the trap, his face twisted with the pain from his damaged limb.

Slobbering half sobs, he attempted to crawl away as Tahk swapped ends and drove thundering blows at the poles with his rear hoofs.

Then all was dark as unconsciousness mercifully applied its anaesthesia. . . .

THE young stallion shook his magnificent head and snorted wildly as he wheeled on his hind hoofs.

Out of the immediate foothills zone there came a shrill whinny. It was the cry of Napa, lead mare of the wild band.

Tahk curled his upper lip and sent out a strident call.

It was a sound that carried to the lower valley; to reach the hearing of a lone rider who was poking along into the glory of the westering sun.

Tom Mason, the rider, swung his leg from around the horn and socked his foot hard into the stirrup. He jerked on a lead rope, pulling a little pack cayuse into action.

"That's—Tahk!" he gasped. "He's in trouble!"

For four years Mason had hunted wild horses up in these foothills. They were excellent stock, showing a good blood line—Morgan and Percheron, not just shaggy mustang stock.

Mason touched his saddler lightly with a spur and shortly, parting a wild fruit thicket, he pulled up in a sharp halt. His eyes widened, as he glimpsed the hastily erected horse trap and then Tahk, the grandest wild stallion since the time of Notwe.

His saddle black suddenly shied. Mason almost grabbed leather. Recovered, he glanced down near the corral to see the limp form of a man.

Mason recognized the fallen man as his rival hunter, Wildhorse Foley.

Dismounting, he hitched his horses and hurried toward the corral. His lips were dry, his heart pumping wildly, with excitement.

When Tahk sounded and struck savagely at the corral poles, Mason automatically leaped to one side.

But now he turned in and dropped to his knees beside Foley.

"Breathin' all right," Mason said softly. Then he gasped as he saw the other hunter's twisted right leg.

"Favorin' it even though he's out cold. Broke, maybe."

Mason got to his feet and swung away to hurry to a near by mountain creek, to scoop up a hatful of water. It hadn't occurred to him to get a canteen from his pack saddle.

Shortly he was back, trickling water between Foley's lips, bathing the injured man's forehead with the cold water.

Foley stirred, to stare, wide-eyed. When the stallion screamed, he clutched at Mason's arm.

A slow smile gathered up Mason's mouth corners at the other's fear and agitation.

"Shake it easy, Wildhorse," he said softly. "I'll take a look-see at your leg. Don't worry about Tahk. He can't get to you."

Foley yelled with pain as Mason made a thorough examination of the badly-discolored leg.

"You're lucky, Wildhorse," Tom said.

"It ain't broke. I think we'd best haul you over to the creek. You could lay in the riffles a spell. Cold water should do it a heap of good."

Within an hour, Foley was dragged from the riffles of the fast chattering creek. Mason built a fire and brewed coffee. He sliced sidemeat thick and made flapjacks.

As they ate, Mason glanced across at the injured man.

"Feel more comfortable?" he questioned.

"Gets better right along, Mason," Foley answered through a mouthful of food.

"Good. I'll help you to your camp. Anybody you know around who could stay with you a spell?"

FOLEY blinked his eyes, dark eyes capable of changing lights with his swiftly changing moods.

"I got to be up an' around soon, Mason. Got an offer of five hundred dollars for the blood bay stud there," he said huskily.

Tom Mason half turned to watch the beautiful young wild creature who was making his great fight to escape. As he turned back to face Foley, his mouth was set in a thin, hard line.

"We had an understandin' Tahk was to be let run free, Wildhorse," he said coldly. "When old Notwe died, Tahk was the only worthwhile stud left with the herd. He—"

A terrible cry sounded from the stallion. Both men swung, quivering, as Tahk gave a further demonstration of his wild savagery as he struck and lashed at his poles.

Tom Mason had risen to his feet, to stare off up to the westerly hills. He suddenly gulped, and turned to Foley.

"See—up there by the birch clump?" he called out. "Little old lead mare callin'. She and the band need the stallion. I'm—"

Tom Mason swung toward the corral. Foley called out to him.

"Hold it, Mason," he yelled hoarsely. "What d'you aim to do?"

"You'll see! Hang an' rattle!"

Mason moved in, talking softly, or whistling as the beautiful wild creature snorted his challenges.

The soft, man-made voice sounds failed to pacify Tahk. He reared and struck. A broken snag on one of the poles cut his off fore pastern. As he tottered back, he screamed.

The man creature stole in, still making those soft sounds.

Now Mason began working at the pole locks of the major gate. Foley had rigged up an inner light trip-gate which had at first closed behind the stallion as he entered the trap, then had set up the heavy pole gate, whose rails he had locked with pegs.

Tahk had smashed down the temporary trip gate, but the outer gate was too stout.

Mason was suddenly startled by a wild yell from Foley.

He wheeled about. Foley had a gun trained on him.

"Come away from that—gate—Mason!" the older man called.

"You're loco, Wildhorse," Tom said sharply. "Get that gun back in its holster."

His own hands were both stretched out at one of the locking pegs at the gate. His every nerve fibre quivered as he made his plan.

Suddenly he whipped to one side, his hand going for his own gun.

Foley fired. A bullet struck a pole, tearing a long jagged sliver from it. This scored Mason across a cheek, but he had made his draw and before the older hunter could pull again, Mason had him covered.

"I'm givin' you a chance to holster that gun, Wildhorse," Mason said. "Make a play an' I'll bust your arm."

Foley made a play. Mason fired, intentionally missing. As his bullet whined past Foley's head, the older hunter dropped his gun to the ground.

Smiling, Mason moved in, picked up the old single action Colt and took it with him to the corral gate.

As Tahk continued to lunge and scream, Mason worked feverishly to release the locking pegs.

Suddenly, with a sharp clatter that sent the stallion toppling back almost to his

haunches, a pole crashed, then another.

Mason wheeled and hurled himself at the main trap rails as Tahk leaped to the clear.

BOTH men stared now at the handsome blood-bay form whose coat seemed to flash live flame.

As he galloped on toward the wild haunts, Tahk snuffled hoarsely, or sent out long penetrating bugled cries . . . and from the heights above, the little mare, Napa, answered with her whinnies of ecstasy.

Smiling broadly, Mason turned to Foley.

"That's it, Wildhorse," he said. "Tahk's risin' three. He'll be needed a few more years at the band. I'm headin' farther west to do my huntin', but I'll be back now and then to keep an eye on the blood-bay—*sabe?*"

Foley scowled.

"Okay, then," Mason went on. "I'm givin' you your gun back. I'll get your horse an' help you to your camp, but get this: you try gunnin' me ag'in an' I—well, just don't do it!"

Foley was reaching with a shaking hand for the coffee pot.

"Maybe if'n you happen on that Ute Injun camp, you'd ask a young feller by the name of Two-Feathers to come lend a hand," he said gruffly.

"Okay, Wildhorse. Drink up your coffee. We'd best be ridin' before dark."

As they rode out, Mason leading, he suddenly halted, to half turn in the saddle, to stare wide-eyed.

On a plateau, where the last blaze of the setting sun transformed him into a flaming statue, Tahk stood head high.

Mason smiled, and glanced back at Foley, but the older hunter merely shrugged.

They rode on, Mason quivering when he heard the wild trumpeting of Tahk.

He was proud of his own conquest, but he felt a strange fear linger in his mind. Frustrated, Wildhorse Foley couldn't be depended on to keep the pact to let Tahk remain with the band.

The rose-gold tints were now subdued by drapes of dripping mauve and purple as wild shadow shapes began their mad frolic across the faces of the mountains, and down along the Wood River valley.

Above, Tahk snuffled hoarsely as he turned to muzzle the flank of his chief consort mare. Napa understood. Making soft throat sounds, she moved and shortly the band strung out in her trail as she led them on up to a favorite higher plateau where shortly Tahk dipped his muzzle to drink at a catch basin at the foot of a noisy, tumbling little waterfall.

As night closed in, in all its powerful majesty, the big young stallion folded himself to rest while near by, her every sense alert, Napa stood on guard.

A week passed. Old Napa moved the band to a more secluded zone. Tahk still limped from the snagging at the trap corral, but he had wisely healed his wound with cold lavings at the creek crossings.

This evening, poised, aloof, on a hog-back ridge, Tahk held his head high. His flared, blood-red nostrils quivered as he searched for any possible danger scent.

Old Napa was down, drowsing on a soft grass cushion below where young stock reared and lunged in their mock battles.

Lazing older stock stood chewing shoulders as the lowering sun started its art work on the gullies and bold outcroppings of the mountain faces.

FOR the next hour the whole panorama within the scope of Tahk's vision became a new world of rugged, golden beauty, until timorous purpled shadow shapes again became lured into their pre-twilight dance.

Tahk suddenly snuffled, and whirled as he picked up a danger scent. It was the dread tang of Acheeta, queen cougar of the Shoshones, and one other of her kind.

Tahk was startled when a young black-tail buck stampeded past in wild frenzy. He was heading for the undulating valley-land below, where whiteface cattle grazed contentedly, or bedded down chewing the cud.

Tahk's nostrils caught the fetid fear scent the buck had exuded as he hurricaned on by. It alarmed the stallion.

Now he wheeled to signal to Napa.

Though asleep, stretched at her full length, the old lead mare came to all fours with miraculous speed to stand, head high, glaring at Tahk's point.

In a flash, young stock ceased their play; old mares wheeled to stand, ready to catch the snuffled signal from Napa.

On the ridge, Tahk quivered in every muscle as the cougar scent freshened.

Then a shifting, fickle evening breeze brought a scent to be feared even more than Acheeta's: It was the tang of a man creature. For the moment, the big cat scent was lost. The cats had caught the man scent and had veered off.

Tahk's keen eyes now picked out movement below. He shrilled a call to Napa. She wheeled and struck out at the head of the frightened band, to lead them on up an old elk trail to the seclusion of more isolated terrain above.

But Tahk did not follow. He wheeled over the hump of the ridge, heading toward the east and shortly, on another ridge, he exposed himself to the man creature below. . . .

Tom Mason swallowed sharply as he pulled up.

"Pretty risky, feller," he breathed softly. "I might easy have been Foley." Mason started to roll a cigarette. For a moment he took his eyes from the beautiful wild creature. When he glanced up, Tahk was gone!

Out of sheer curiosity, Mason touched up his saddler and sent him forward.

Within an hour Tahk's trail had led him to more broken country. He heard the musical clatter of a bounding mountain stream, gasped in admiration at a belt of Douglas spruces and aspens. Here was an ideal camp site. There would be trout in the creek.

Soon Mason was eating with relish fresh fried trout.

It was a glorious evening, when all the wilds seemed at peace, but suddenly his horses shied, snorting. Out of the east there came a strident call from Tahk. . . .

Mason's horses were spooked. They shied back on their tether ropes.

"Lion, or mebbe silvertip!" the horse hunter told himself. He got to his feet and moved to his pack saddle to draw out his Winchester carbine.

From the hills at his back came a wild cry from Napa, the lead mare—then an answering call from Tahk, but Tahk's cry came from the same spot as the previous call. "He's held up, cut off maybe," Mason said softly.

He felt a twinge of conscience as he started out to cross the creek. He was thinking of the dangers which beset such wild creatures as Tahk and his wild band.

"Grizzly, lion and—man!"

But Mason shrugged. It was the way of the wilderness! Fang, talon, antler and wild hoofs ever in clashing combat for survival.

THERE were times when Mason had planned to get himself a small ranch spread and settle down raising cows, but the call of this rugged wild country was always too strong.

"I'll take a pasear along east and see what I can come up with," he decided. He was sure danger lurked.

Another wild cry from Tahk sent him hurrying forward determined to ascertain the cause of the stallion's stalemate.

Shortly as he skimmed along the rimrock of a narrow shelf, Mason came to a halt. There was excellent light yet.

He nipped in behind a shoulder as he glimpsed man movement across a broad canyon. "Foley!" Mason gasped. "And I told him plain enough to stay clear of Tahk and the—band."

He was cut short by a terrific blast of rifle fire.

Mason was already scrambling down the canyon slope as the reverberations of the shot echoed like thunder along the broken gullies. At the draw bottom, he turned and struck on toward the northeast, hugging the bank closely. Tahk, the beautiful stallion, was down. He lay very still as Mason at last glimpsed him.

Mason bit sharply at his underlip as he waited with the patience of a mountain lion for Foley to come into view. He could hear rock rubble falling. The horse

hunter was close in.

Now the big man came down to the bottom of the canyon. Mason could even see the grin on his rival's stubbled face. Foley carried ropes tied around his waist.

Carbine gripped ready for instant action. Mason called:

"Hold it, Wildhorse!"

Foley stopped as suddenly as if he'd been shot in the back. He carried his Winchester across his thighs.

"Let your rifle slide down your legs, Wildhorse," Mason directed. "Don't be foolish again."

Foley had no alternative. He let the Winchester slide down.

Shortly he felt the muzzle of Mason's carbine in the small of his back. Quickly Tom snatched the other man's six-gun from its holster. He now backed off, having scooped up the rifle, too.

He laid all the weapons on a nearby flat boulder, then moved in on Foley.

"Turn around, Wildhorse," he called coldly. "This is it! I warned you. It was bad enough tryin' to hold the big feller in that trap. Now you've killed him, I'm going to tear you apart."

"He ain't dead, Mason just neck-creased. Had my rifle set in the fork of a pine, couldn't miss."

Mason was poised for action when in desperation, Foley lunged, head lowered.

Mason was almost caught off guard. Only in the nick of time did he whip to one side—to wheel and crash a wild looping fist flush to the other's mouth.

As Foley spun on his bootheels, Mason rushed in and belted him furiously.

Almost out, the bigger man wheeled, and lunged forward at Mason.

They dropped heavily to the ground.

For some moments, as he sobbed out his curses, Foley administered plenty of punishment. When Mason felt a thumb strike at his left eye, he struck up in desperation with the heels of both hands, chocking the bigger man's head back.

Before Foley could fully recover, Mason had bridged his well-conditioned body. He heaved, then rolled, spilling the other man from him.

Breathing sharply, blinking through his lightly injured eye, Mason waited only a moment or so, to steady himself. Then as he saw Wildhorse lunge in an attempt to scoop up a gun, Tom rushed.

The rest of the grim fight was short lived. Half sobbing in his anger, Mason almost punched himself out as he dropped the big man, hauled him half to his feet and dropped him again, and again.

Now, breathing on bleeding knuckles, Mason stepped back to glare down at the twisted form of his rival.

Foley at last stirred. Mason moved in to empty the man's gun and rifle.

Now, as he licked a wheatstraw cigarette paper, he started. From the upland heights there came the wild ringing call of Tahk!

Mason spun! The cry had brought Foley's head up. He sat up, batting his eyes at Mason, questioning eyes.

"Big cats, Foley," Mason gasped. "You hightail clear out of Wyomin'. Get to your feet and beat it. I'm goin' up to lend a hand to the wild band. If I ever catch you on this range again, I'll fix you!"

Mason stepped in as Foley struggled to his feet. The big man flung an arm up to protect his face, but Mason did not throw a punch. "Okay—okay, Mason, I'm goin'," he grumbled through cut lips. "Can I have my guns?"

Mason nodded and spun away.

As he climbed up to the first ridge, he heard the stomp of powerful hoofs. Tahk was in action, speeding like a thunderous hurricane back to his band.

Tahk wheeled grandiosely about his huddled band. He snorted as his powerful hoofs drummed their tattoo on the light moss covering of the small plateau.

Evil eyes gleamed through ports in a fringe of scrub brush.

The tang of blood scent, the scent of death, was strong in Tahk's flared nostrils. Acheeta and her big son of last year's litter had made a kill. A small, long yearling filly was stretched out at the edge of the plateau; another youngling dragged herself off, to lie down, to breathe heavily from a grievous wound.

Nearby, her flanks dripping soapy foam, Napa quivered. For some time, until the arrival of Tahk, she had fought off the cougar pair. Most of the other adult members of the band had stampeded.

Suddenly, with a husky scream, Tahk half reared and lunged as the male cougar broke cover.

As the stallion struck, the agile cat whipped expertly to one side, then lashed savagely up as Tahk went in.

TAHK screamed with pain as a rowel-ing set of talons raked his muzzle. He whirled to attack, and in that instant the long form of Acheeta stretched.

Tahk was her target. As she struck his back, sinking her fiendish talons deep into his hide, Tahk squealed. He buckled at a foreleg and almost spilled out over the rim of the plateau.

But he recovered sharply and whirled to go lunging through the brush. Acheeta's fangs were sinking—sinking threateningly as Tahk hurricaned in under the lower branches of a sweeping pine.

Acheeta screeched her curses as she toppled from her quarry's back.

For long moments the two chieftains of the craglands stood frozen, glaring, flame jetting from their eyes in their hatred, and determination to kill.

Suddenly Napa whinnied shrilly. Tahk rose superbly, to clear the crouched form of the big cat. He crashed brush and struck the plateau as Napa went to her knees under the weight of the male lion.

The lion's fangs were dangerously near her spinal cord when, with a terrible blast from his deep throat, Tahk lunged.

He was a picture Tom Mason would never forget.

For a brief instant Tahk was poised in all his glory, at full height before suddenly he drove down with unerring aim at that crouched form on Napa's back.

The lion screamed as a terrible forehoof struck him, smashing in a shoulder, sending him spilling out over the rimrock, to the long drop to rock country below.

At her son's wild cry, Acheeta rose in a fifteen-foot leap. Tahk was almost off guard.

Mason raised his carbine slowly.

About to squeeze the trigger, he froze. Tahk had given out his fiercest battle cry as he reared. Then like lightning, he swapped ends, to lash out with his battery of rear hoofs. Mason licked his suddenly dry, parched lips as he watched the long, limp form of Acheeta sent crashing into the nearby scrub brush.

Proudly Tahk stomped forward, snorting, pawing, ready in an instant to resume battle, but Acheeta kicked only a time or two before stretching out in death.

The man shook as he backed away.

Little Napa was rising. She staggered forward to flank Tahk. He turned and nuzzled her, snuffling softly. Then suddenly he flung his head up. His eyes blazed as he rose and wheeled. A fickle breeze had brought him man scent.

In a flash, Napa had spun, to go charging on through the brush, the frightened band stomping in on her trail.

Tahk followed, throating hoarse sounds.

On through the brush, into the clear of a scored gully Napa led. She struck an old game trail and climbed steadily for an hour, until at last she brought the band to a halt on a gently sloping plateau.

Here, where the timorous goats came down to drink, Tahk came to a halt, to turn and lift his magnificent head.

He curled his strong, torn lip and gave out a fierce sound, a trumpeted call that resounded in penetrating echoes.

His call declared his defiance, his strong challenges and the declaration of his continued majesty. This was his range, the inheritance from the great Notwe!

In the distance, far below where the cattle of the man creatures bedded down, a coyote wailed and yodeled. But such sounds did not disturb the stallion king.

For so long as man would permit, Tahk would continued to manifest his power, high in the wild land of his monarchy.

As full night closed in, he stood alone, on guard while Napa and the band slept in peace, a peace which brought surcease for their wounds.

A TRUE STORY
by
SIMPSON
RITTER

"Get out, Hobart," said the man with the gun

No More Notches for Ben

A SHOT rang out sharply in the night. No one paid much attention to it. Shots in the night—or, in fact, at any other time—were too common those days.

That was Austin, Texas, in the year of 1863.

The man who had been shot fell to the dirt. He lay there in an alley behind one of the towns many gambling halls and saloons, clutching at the night-damp ground with clawed fingers. The bullet hole in his chest slowly leaked blood that made a widening pool beneath him. An unfired Colt, hammer cocked, lay where it had fallen, still within reach of his hand.

It was an old and familiar story. The other man had been faster. Twice before,

THE CAREER OF A TRAIL-TOWN TINHORN

when others had challenged his card-playing tactics and gone into the alley back of the saloon to shoot it out, the other man had been faster.

No one paid any heed to the dying man as he moaned and writhed in the dirt. To have come to his aid might not have been a healthy thing to do in those wild and turbulent days. Anyway, Austin, abounding with the riffraff and the outscourings of the untamed frontier, habitually took no cognizance of the lawless or made any attempt to restrain them.

When men finally did get around to Ev Corkan, it was probably because it seemed certain then that he must be dead. It was morning, and the customary time for carting away the garbage and refuse and the debris of the night just past.

Dying Rancher Names Gambler

But Ev Corkan wasn't quite dead yet. There was still a few minutes of breath left in him. He had only strength enough left, however, to whisper a name—Hobart.

That was enough. Everyone knew Hobart, the gambler, the gun-man, the fancy dresser.

They packed Ev Corkan, still alive, on a horse, and two men accepted the responsibility of seeing that he got home to his ranch, eight miles away. But Ev had breathed his last when they came within sight of his house.

Ev's two sons, James and Philip, met the riders and helped carry their father's body into the living room. Each of the boys took the news of what had happened in his own way. James, the younger, about nineteen, blond and sturdy, his face as white as linen, merely repeated the killer's name. Philip, the older, dark, slight and sickly, permitted a tear to fall.

The body was laid out on a bed in the main living room. Then James strapped on his gunbelt and holster.

"I'm going to town," he said simply.

From the door of the house, Philip watched his younger brother saddle up and mount. As James rode away, Philip shook his head sorrowfully.

Meanwhile, at his hotel, Ben Hobart had just finished his morning grooming. Impeccably dressed, debonair, he went downstairs and sauntered into the hotel's restaurant. Others were already eating their lunch, but Hobart ordered breakfast. He was half through the meal, enjoying it leisurely, when a young, armed man pushed open the restaurant's street door.

Feet planted wide, he stood there, framed in the doorway, searching the faces of the room's occupants.

"I'm looking for a card cheat and a killer," he announced. "Calls himself Ben Hobart. Which of you answers to that handle?"

Everything in the room came to an immediate hush. The clink of glasses, clatter of china and the metallic clash of tableware died away. Some of the diners cast unconscious, furtive glances toward where Ben Hobart sat, idly dabbing at his lips with a napkin.

Ben Hobart flushed, but promptly he again had his nerves under iron control. He finished the dainty wiping of his lips, put the napkin down beside his plate and slowly rose to his feet.

"My name is Hobart, sir," he said, turning toward the youth, "but I do not recognize the balance of your identification. I'm sure you will accord me an explanation."

"Murderer!" the young man screamed, and his hand slapped for the six-gun at his hip.

Hobart Kills Again

The weapon had scarcely cleared the holster when the shot slammed across the room. James Corkan's gun thudded to the floor. A smoking Colt was in Ben Hobart's fist. The younger man's hand was spilling blood.

His face wracked with pain, young James stooped to recover his fallen revolver. He never quite made it. A second shot thundered in the shocked stillness that had claimed the restaurant. This time, the boy pitched soddenly to the floor, a ragged hole in his throat. He stirred feebly once, and then lay still.

Unhurriedly, Ben Hobart put away his own gun. With an unruffled deliberateness he strolled over to the boy's corpse,

poked at it with his foot. Satisfied, apparently, he went out into the hotel lobby and then up to his room.

But despite his outward calm, a storm of turmoil was raging within gambler Ben Hobart. He knew he had reached his limit of killings in Austin, and, hard as he was, he realized this last slaying was going to shock the sensibilities of the so-called "decent" element in town.

It was time to look for greener pastures.

Methodically, but rapidly, Hobart began packing his belongings. When he was through, he consulted his time-piece. In twenty minutes, he knew, a stage would be leaving for points west. He called for a porter and had his things fetched down.

With only slight incident, Ben Hobart boarded the stage. Three other men got in beside him. A fourth man, who apparently intended to get on the stage had changed his mind when Hobart appeared.

Passengers Are Hostile

Hobart was aware that the attitude of those beside him was hostile. Each of the passengers was obviously making a deliberate point of not speaking to him, ignoring his tentative try at conversation.

The stage before long was moving through open country. One could see for miles on either side. And then it happened. First one horseman and then another appeared on the distant scene. As the stage proceeded farther and farther out of town, other horsemen appeared, and their distance from the stage lessened.

Hobart tried not to show his concern. It was pure coincidence, he told himself, that there were so many riders near. There were always riders close to a big place like Austin. But why were they moving closer to the stage all the time, seeming to forge a ring about it?

Now there were no fewer than two dozen riders, and none of them was more than a hundred yards distant from the rumbling, swaying stage.

The riders came closer, still closer. Then, as though by prearranged signal, the stage came to a halt. The driver kept his seat, but the gun-guard dismounted from the box. The three passengers, still maintaining their rigid silence, also got out.

"What's this all about?" Hobart asked.

One of the riders edged his horse up to the stage door, looked inside.

"Get out, Hobart," he said. "This is as far as you go. Don't try reaching for a gun. You may get one of us, but you're covered all around."

Gambler Does Not Resist

Ben Hobart, his hands well away from his guns, stepped down curiously from the stage. Someone threw a noosed rope. It landed neatly, with the noose about Hobart's neck. The rider who held the other end tugged it tight.

"Come along, you," he said. "We've got a party arranged."

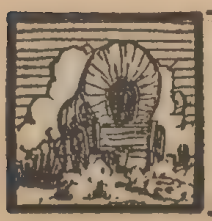
The rider who had ordered Ben Hobart out of the stage now nodded to the driver. The driver waited until his guard had again mounted the box. The three passengers resumed their seats inside.

They rode away, leaving Hobart and the riders behind.

What happened to Hobart?

Though there were an even two dozen riders in the group that stopped the coach, no one knows to this day what happened to him. Was he hanged? Did he get away? One guess is as good as another. For of the twenty-four riders in the party who might have reason to know Hobart's fate none ever spoke of it.

However—no one ever heard of Ben Hobart, gambler, gunman, fancy dresser again.



A caravan of good reading in the March issue of our companion magazine WEST, featuring two new top-flight novels —WEST OF THE TULAROSA by Jim Mayo and THE HUNKPAPA SCOUT by Clay Fisher! Now on sale, 20c per copy

SIX-GUN

Pecos Burke ends a necktie party and slams the tang of gunsmoke justice into a courtroom

The masked men turned to find themselves covered by a rider with two guns drawn

CHAPTER I

Necktie Party

EYES glaring wildly at the men around him, John Masters spoke in a voice that was choked with emotion.

"For God's sake, boys!" he pleaded. "I shot in defense of my son. It's bad enough that they sling me into jail for what was only a justifiable killing, but at least they were aiming to give me a trial. What's a trial for, if not to find out whether a man is guilty or innocent? You're not even waiting for that. No sir, I haven't even been tried yet and you're a-hanging me."

Mounted, hands tied behind his back, rope around his neck, John Masters made his last plea. The hanging party consisted of six men, all masked. Five were mounted but one of them stood by the doomed man's horse, ready to give it a sharp

STRANGER

a novelet by BERNARD BRESLAUER

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rap on the flank as soon as the leader of the group gave the signal. The men made no answer to the plea.

One of the mounted men raised his gun. At the same time the man on foot lifted his hand in readiness to strike the blow that would send the horse on its way, riderless, leaving the figure of John Masters dancing on empty air. The revolver, held overhead, spat fire!

But John Masters did not hang. Another shot had rung out. The man on foot had struck the horse a sharp blow and the horse had bounded forward, but John Masters was not left hanging in the air. The rope had snapped as though cut by a sharp invisible knife. John Masters was not jerked off his horse, he fell off. The rope, cut by a bullet, dangled uselessly from the tree limb.

"Raise 'em high!"

The masked men looked up to find themselves covered by a rider silhouetted against the downward-dipping sun. Horse and rider were motionless on an overhanging ledge, and the rider, two guns drawn, one of them still smoking from the shot that had split the rope, looked calmly down.

The masked men, controlling an impulse to reach for their guns, slowly raised their arms—the dangling rope was too good a witness to the stranger's shooting powers.

"None of you move from where you are unless I tell you," drawled the stranger. "I'm a-comin' down but I'll have you covered."

He came off the ledge.

"Line up abreast," he ordered. "Now lift your irons straight up, easy, and drop 'em . . . that's fine. Now you—yep you, the rump-slapper—untie that man's hands. That's the stuff. Pick up their arms, brother, and come on over here with 'em. Now get down, all of you, and freeze alongside your horses."

A GRIM smile played about the stranger's mouth as he watched his orders being obeyed. He was tall and young, deeply bronzed, lean-cheeked, with keen eyes set wide apart. He sat his coal-black horse like an Indian. "Take 'em off."

No one moved.

"The bandannas," he said, his voice sharpening. "Take 'em off! Let's have a look at your ugly pans."

Reluctantly the members of the lynching party unmasked. "Know any of 'em?" the stranger inquired of Masters.

Masters nodded eagerly, pointing as he spoke each name: "Pete Smiley, Pol Edwards, Jake Wendell, Joe Farrell. The other two I know by sight—they're a couple of Mex loafers who hang around the Tivoli in town."

"How about the rest? They work for anyone?"

"Not that I know of. They just hang around. Jake Wendell used to work for me but I threw him off my spread when I found a strange branding iron in his bunk."

He was interrupted by the man he was talking about. "Stranger," said Jake Wendell in a voice that betrayed the temper he was trying to keep under control, "you're meddling in what ain't your business. We were aiming to hang Masters fair and square for a cold-blooded murder."

The stranger's smile faded. "Maybe you fellers are officers of the law, but you don't look like it to me. This man was in jail waitin' trial. I just come from there so I know. If he was guilty he'd be hanged anyway, wouldn't he? So what made you gents so impatient?"

"We're for law and order but we don't like the law's delay, that's all."

"Maybe so," said the stranger. "But I don't like hangings."

Jake Wendell flushed. "What call you got to butt in this way?"

The stranger tapped one revolver against the other. "Got no authority but what's in these," he said. Almost before he had finished speaking one of the weapons spat flame. There was a cry of pain. One of the Mexicans clutched a bleeding wrist. A knife fell from his hand.

"My mistake," said the stranger. "Forgot about the knives. Drop yours," he said to the other Mexican, "an' tie up your friend's arm before he bleeds to death. You, the hombre they were hanging, tie up the rest of them. One at a time, wrists together—then tie their hands up to their stirrups. They'll be walking back to town and it'll give 'em time to think over the error of their ways."

Under cover of the stranger's guns, Masters' efforts met with curses but no

resistance. When the job was finished the stranger nodded approvingly. "Okay," he said. "On your way. I know it's a mite awkward, but you'll be all right if your horses don't take it into their heads to make time. See you-all later—maybe."

When they were gone Masters' knees suddenly began to shake—he was experiencing the reaction from his narrow escape and he sat down on a rock. The stranger rolled two cigarettes and passed him one, lighting it for him.

"You didn't come a mite too soon," Masters at last managed to murmur. "Be you Pecos Burke?"

The stranger nodded. "And you're John Masters."

"It was a long shot I played, sending you that note by my son. I wasn't bankin' on your coming, you being a total stranger to me. But Hank Bellew told me on his death-bed that if I ever was in trouble I should send for you, mentioning his name. I smelled that lynching in the air as far back as a week ago. What we going to do now?"

"I'm taking you back to the jail."

Masters gasped. "Back to jail? What for? They'll try to lynch me again, and the next time they'll succeed. A break like this—like your coming up when you did—don't happen more than once to a man!"

"Just the same you're going back. You can trust me. You don't suppose I'd a-helped you out in the first place if I wasn't meaning to go the whole hog? What do you want—a posse after you and a bullet instead of a rope? You're safest in jail."

"Maybe you're right."

"Then get up behind me. We'll be getting along to town."

BOONETOWN'S main street had three saloons, a jail—part of the wooden courthouse—a post office and general store, a Wells-Fargo express branch, the marshal's office and the sheriff's quarters.

Eight horses were tethered outside the sheriff's door, the riders having just gone inside. Sheriff Cannon sat at his desk, cleaning a revolver.

"So you couldn't pick up the necktie party, eh?" he said. "What's the matter, Stew? Can't you pick up a trail any more?"

The man addressed as Stew rubbed his hand across his stubble-grown chin and grinned. "There ain't no trail I can't pick up, boss. We picked this one up fast and then rode hellbent in the opposite direction—as per instructions—I ain't saying whose."

The others guffawed. The sheriff dipped into a drawer and passed out cheroots, lighting one himself. Stew Mosher went on: "All that the homefolks has to do to know that Sheriff Cannon's deps have done their duty is to take one look at us and our horses. We sure rode them hard to nowhere and back again."

"Too bad you couldn't pick up the trail," Cannon murmured. "Poor old Masters must be a gonner by now."

"It don't take long to stretch a neck."

"Wonder why Wendell and the rest aren't back yet."

"They'll be coming along soon, I reckon." As Stew Mosher spoke there was a loud knock on the door. "This must be them now— No, wait a minute!" Stew was peering out of the window. "There's only two of them."

"Come in," the sheriff called.

Pecos Burke entered, followed by John Masters.

A very peculiar expression flitted across the sheriff's face and was gone as quickly as it had come. The next instant he had jumped to his feet with his hand extended and in a hearty voice was exclaiming: "By heaven, it's Masters! Well, I sure am glad to see you safe. Posse here just got back with the report they couldn't pick up the trail, and we all thought you were a goner by this time. Who are you, stranger?"

"Hadn't been for him," Masters interjected, "I'd have been buzzard meat. He happened up just in time."

"Well, that is good news. Not, of course,

that I'm expressing any opinion as to your guilt or innocence of the crime you're charged with, Masters, but I certainly didn't want to see you hanged irregular, if you're going to be hanged at all. I admit I may be a mite prejudiced against you, seeing as the man you shot was my own brother. But that has nothing to do with my duty to see that you get a trial. Much obliged to you, stranger, for stopping the hanging and for bringing the prisoner in. I'll take charge of him now and see that he's kept safe."

"See that you do," said Pecos.

"What might you be meaning by that, stranger?"

"N o t h i n g—nothing at all," Pecos drawled. "Only you might say, in a manner of speaking, that after saving a hombre from a lynching, I got kind of an interest in that hombre—sort of like he belongs to me a little."

"He belongs to the law. What's your name, stranger?"

"Pecos Burke," came the answer, as though it were of no importance. "There's just one other thing, if you don't mind my saying so. Seeing as the law is so respected in these parts, I reckon it's your job to take action against the varmints that was in on that necktie party."

"That goes without saying," Cannon snapped. "But first we've got to round them up."

"And I reckon you won't have much trouble about that," Pecos retorted, "seeing as we passed 'em just outside town—they appeared to be heading this way, so if you send a couple of your men out now, you can corral them in less time than it takes to tell about it." He rapidly gave their names. "You'll know 'em because their hands are tied."

"Stew and Bill!" the sheriff ordered. "Get outside and see whether this stranger is right." He turned to Pecos. "Don't seem likely they'd be coming here if they were the guilty parties. Reckon you're mistaken."

But Pecos Burke was not mistaken. Stew Mosher returned, herding ahead of him the erstwhile lynchers.

"Well," the sheriff said sharply, "what's the meanin' o' this!"

"Untie my hands," said Jake Wendell in a voice shaken by suppressed rage, "and I'll talk."

The sheriff looked at him fixedly. "I mean I'll explain," Wendell muttered, almost too low to hear, but Pecos' ears were sharp and his eyes did not miss the exchange of stares between the two men.

CANNON leaned back comfortably. "All right, Wendell. You're here on a charge of attempted lynching on this man's say-so. What's your story?"

"Sheriff, this stranger's a consarned fool. It wasn't a lynching and it wasn't meant to be one. Me and the boys was only aiming to have some fun, that's all. We broke into the jail and took Masters out, but we wasn't aiming to lynch him—just throw a scare into him!"

"Kind of a rough joke, don't you think?" a deep voice suddenly boomed from the doorway. They all turned. The man who had spoken was short and stocky, and stood with his thumbs in his vest in an attitude of lazy interest. His jacket was drawn away to reveal the two guns in his belt and the badge pinned over his heart. "Saw the excitement from my office across the street," he explained mildly, "and thought I'd come over. You don't mind, do you, Sheriff?"

"A visit from the marshal is always welcome, Talley. Have a cigar."

"No, thanks. Go on with your story, Jake. It sounds good."

"Well, as I was saying," went on Jake, looking a little uncomfortable. "We were playing a prank. If this stranger says it was a hanging, he's a low-down liar."

"It sure looked like nothing else to me," Pecos drawled.

"What it looked like and what it was are two different things."

"Rope round a man's neck," said Pecos. "Rope tied onto a boulder. Man on horse. Smack the horse. Horse goes hell for leather. Man's left hanging—chokes to death if his neck's not broken. If that's not an honest to goodness hanging, then

I don't know what is."

"That's where you're wrong," Wendell sneered. "We put a rope around Masters' neck all right, and that may have made it look like a hanging, but we made the noose with a figure eight knot. Which means that if you hadn't butted in, the rope would have slipped off Masters' neck as easy as water off a duck's back, just as soon as his horse started moving. Ain't that so, boys?"

There was a chorus of assent, emphasized by the "*Si-si*" of the Mexicans. The sheriff looked at Pecos. "Reckon you made a little mistake, Burke."

An imperceptible side-glance from Pecos silenced Masters, who had been about to burst out with something. "I reckon so," Pecos said quietly. "Reckon too, I'll have to beg all you boys' pardon. You sure made it look real."

"Stew," said the sheriff, "lock Masters up. Stranger, you needn't feel bad about it. You couldn't tell."

"No, I couldn't tell," Pecos echoed, as Stew Mosher led Masters out. "Well, I guess I'll be going. So long."

As he stepped outside, closing the door behind him, he was just able to hear the beginnings of the laughter inside. A figure emerged out of the shadows, came close to him. Pecos recognized the marshal.

"Too much of a skunk smell inside," Talley said in low tones. "I came out for some fresh air."

"So you didn't swallow Wendell's yarn either?"

"Of course not."

"How long you been marshal?"

"About a month. The office was made special. The decent folk of this town put me in."

"How come they put in Cannon if they're so decent?"

"They didn't. I ran against Cannon two years ago. Know what he did? Started a rumor of a gold strike on Ruggles Creek. Lot of floaters came in. Claim staking made them property owners and that gave 'em the vote. Takes more than a month to size up a man like Cannon. They voted for him. A couple of months later, not finding any gold, they moved out, but Cannon was left holding office."

"Smart," Pecos said.

"Some day he'll be too smart."

"Maybe that day has come. No chance of his arresting Wendell, is there, if I give him the evidence?"

"Not much. Even if he did it would be just for show. There's a slim chance that Judge Worden might find him and the rest guilty of disturbing the peace, but that's about all—a five-dollar fine."

"Who's Judge Worden?"

"No more fit to hold court than a wolf to watch sheep."

"That leaves you," said Pecos. "Suppose I give you the evidence? Would you make the arrest?"

"You won't have to ask me twice," Talley answered quietly.

"All right. Get on your horse and follow me." Pecos mounted. Talley went across the street to where his own horse was tethered. Together they rode out of town. Once outside they rode swiftly, Pecos leading.

In a short time they had reached the scene of the attempted lynching. Pecos dismounted and searched the ground. Straightening, he passed something up to Talley. "Here's the noose," he said. He struck a match. "What kind of a knot would you say that was?"

"That," said Talley deliberately, "is a hanging knot."

"Need any more evidence than that?"

"No. Let's go."

CHAPTER II

Death in the Tivoli

JAKE WENDELL was telling the bartender of the Tivoli about the "joke" when Marshal Talley entered the saloon. He walked up to Wendell.

"Finish your drink, Jake. You're under arrest."

Wendell set the glass down on the bar.

"Me? What for?"

"Attempted murder. Take a look at this." He exhibited the cut rope, with its noose and hangman's knot. "No figure eight in that. Hurry up, finish your drink."

Wendell's mouth assumed an ugly twist. The next instant he had dashed the contents of his glass into Marshal Talley's eyes, and his gun was out. It spat lead and flame. There was a clatter of handcuffs on the floor, and Talley, clasping both hands to his midriff with a look of surprised agony in his face, doubled forward and sank down moaning. At the first sound of shooting all in the saloon had ducked for shelter—no one saw Jake Wendell stoop quickly, seize the rope, unslip its noose and fling the rope down again as though the thing had burned his fingers—no one but—

"Raise 'em high, Wendell," said Pecos from the doorway.

But Wendell, crazed by the blood he had already shed, raised his gun instead of his arms. He never fired it. Pecos had started coming in, thumbing the hammer as he came. The gun dropped from Wendell's shattered wrist. Pecos came on, holstering one revolver. Wendell recoiled and found himself backing up against the bar. With a savage curse, Pecos' walk became a leap. His free fist crashed against Wendell's jaw. Wendell's head jerked back sickeningly, his eyeballs shot up, his knees buckled and he sagged to the floor.

"Come out of your holes, all you people," Pecos shouted, "and see what's happened here!"

They came out slowly, fearfully, as Sheriff Cannon and some of his deputies entered the saloon. "What's all the shooting about!" Cannon demanded sharply, his own gun drawn.

"This hunk of meat," Pecos said quietly, disregarding the fact that the sheriff's gun seemed to be pointed at him, "just shot Talley. Maybe Talley's dead—I haven't looked to see yet."

"Stay where you are, Burke!"

Pecos looked at Cannon, then said slowly, "Save your orders for your own men, Sheriff. It's easy enough to pull a trigger and it'd be easy enough to send a bullet into me. Just the same, it ain't healthy not to know something about the man you're aiming to plug. I'm advising you, save your lead."

Without further words he went to the body of Talley and knelt beside it, placing his ear to the marshal's chest. The heart was beating rapidly—a bad sign. As he straightened, kneeling, the wounded man's eyes flickered, opened.

"Hurt bad, Talley?" Pecos asked softly.

Talley's face twisted in a grimace of pain.

"I told you I wanted to come with you," Pecos said regretfully.

"You had something else to do," Talley whispered. "Not your fault. I should have known better than to go for Wendell with handcuffs instead of a gun, but I'd always ticketed him as yellow—liquor must've given him the missin' courage."

"He'll swing for this," Pecos murmured, his voice breaking a little as he saw bubbles appear on Talley's lips and the spreading pallor on his face. "I'm a-promising you."

Talley smiled crookedly. "I think I'm through, Pecos. Take my badge—take it. I got the power to make you marshal. You'll be a better one than me. Take it, Pecos, and—and use it right."

Silently Pecos transferred the badge from Talley's vest to his own. It seemed that when he did so Talley's life went with it, for when Pecos placed his ear to Talley's chest again, the heart no longer beat.

Pecos rose to his feet, his face stony. The saloon had been filling up, for the noise of the shooting had brought out what looked like the whole town, emptying the other saloons. Pecos eyed the crowd, trying to pick out those whom Talley had called the "decent folk." The trouble with "decent folk," he thought, was that they were too "decent" to stand up against the other kind with the same weapons.

THE man called "Stew"—Stew Mosher—he was one of the other kind—probably Cannon's dirty-work man. It hadn't escaped Pecos' attention that when he was kneeling beside Talley, Mosher's hand had strayed toward his holster, that Stew Mosher's lips had moved, muttering something to the sheriff, that Cannon had shaken his head, that Mosher's hand had dropped to his side again.

The trouble, Pecos thought, was that the so-called decent folk had lacked a leader up to now.

"Marshal Talley is dead," Pecos announced. "He's made me marshal in his place. Any objections?"

Cannon shook his head. "Suppose we put it up to Judge Worden here," he suggested. "Glad you happened in, Judge."

Judge Worden, a huge beefy man, with puff-sacs under his eyes, had waddled in with one of Cannon's deputies, probably sent for, Pecos thought.

"There's been some trouble here, Judge," Cannon explained. "Marshal Talley is dead. He's appointed this man, Pecos Burke, marshal in his place. We all want to know if it's legal."

Judge Worden mopped his fat, perspiring face with a soiled handkerchief. "That depends," he wheezed, looking up uncertainly at Cannon. Someone had brought him a chair to sit on. What he saw in Cannon's face must have decided him, for he went on: "Marshal Talley had a right to appoint another man as marshal in his place, but"—he paused impressively and raised his voice—"that other man has to be a resident. So, since this man here is a stranger, he can't be marshal."

"That let's you out, Burke," said Cannon, shrugging his shoulders. "I reckon if we want another marshal we can elect one."

"Not so fast," said Pecos. "I reckon I know a little about law myself. There's one trick you're missing, Cannon. I *am* a resident of these parts. I've been one for two years. It just so happens that I staked a claim on Ruggles Creek in that fake stampede. So I'm accepting the job. Any objections, Judge Worden?"

"None," the fat man was forced to admit. "The law is as you say."

"Good. Then suppose we hold court."

"Hold court? Where? Why?"

"Answering your questions in order," Pecos snapped. "Yes— here— because court can be held where the judge is!"

"But what's the case?"

"First, attempted lynching; second murder," Pecos answered promptly.

"And who might the accused be?"

"Jake Wendell. Attempted lynching of Masters; murder of Talley."

The judge loosened his collar, and mopped his face. "Most irregular," he said. "Can't hold court in a saloon. Time enough tomorrow morning."

Sheriff Cannon bent down and said something to him. The judge continued: "However, in this case, I'll make an exception. Take seats, as many as can find them. Push back the tables. Let the body be removed. Mr. Harkness, I believe that's your job."

The man who had stepped out of the crowd and whom the judge had addressed as Harkness, walked over to the body deliberately and, with practised motion, hoisted it onto his shoulder. In passing Pecos he stopped as if to get the body into a more comfortable position and muttered, too low for anyone else to hear. "I'm the undertaker in this town. More business since Cannon's been a resident than for five years before that. Lead poisoning, most of 'em. Watch your step. I wouldn't like to be doing for you what I'm doing for Talley."

"Thanks," Pecos muttered back. This was one of the "decent" ones.

Without saying more, Harkness went out with the body into the night. Something swelled in Pecos Burke's chest. Tough—tough. Talley's death hit him hard.

"State the basis for your accusation," he heard the judge say.

Instantly he was alert. "Worden," he began—

"You can address me as 'Your Honor,' " the judge commanded very sharply.

PECOS swallowed. "Your honor," he amended, "I'll make it short, asking that Wendell be held for jury trial when I'm through. This afternoon I surprised Wendell and five others in the act of lynching John Masters. I disarmed him and the rest, tied them up to their horses and sent them on their way."

"Why didn't you arrest them?"

"I wasn't a marshal then," Pecos answered quickly, and there was a murmur of approval from the audience, mingled with some hisses.

"Continue," Judge Worden said.

"I came into town ahead of them and delivered Masters over to the sheriff. On my advice two deputies corralled the lynchers out on the street and brought them in. Wendell changed his story, and said that the lynching was a fake, only a joke, that they'd made the noose with a fake knot because they were only aiming to throw a scare into Masters and have some fun. On the strength of that story Sheriff Masters refused to arrest Wendell.

"Marshal Talley and I then rode to the scene of the lynching and found the rope that was used. Marshall Talley took the rope as evidence and rode back to town to arrest Wendell, while I went on some business of my own. In attempting to make the arrest, Marshall Talley was shot dead by Wendell. After shooting Talley, Wendell tried to shoot me too, but failed, as you can see."

"Produce the rope," the judge ordered.

"I was waiting for that," Pecos said. "You're seeing it. You're all seeing it. It's in plain sight. It so happens that I saw Wendell untie it after he shot Talley."

"Anyone else see that?" the judge asked sharply.

No one answered. Pecos explained bitterly. "They were all taking cover." There was a trace of contempt in his voice.

"In other words," said Judge Worden, "we have only your word for it."

"Sure," said Pecos. "Who else? Talley's dead."

"And," the judge went on, "it isn't even your word as an officer of the law, since you weren't a marshal then."

"What difference does that make?"

The judge disregarded the question, saying, "So far there's been a lot of loose talk, but no evidence. Legally it shapes up that Wendell shot Talley in self-defense. It goes further even than that. You, Burke, in making still another attempt to arrest Wendell, lay yourself open to the same charge, and in addition, a charge of felonious assault."

Pecos could hardly believe his ears. "Who's being tried here?" he asked. "Me, or Wendell?"

"No one is being tried here!" Sheriff Cannon's voice rapped out suddenly. He had left his position behind the judge's chair and gone over to the recumbent figure of Wendell. "Nobody is being tried here because you can't try a dead man! Wendell is dead!"

The crowd started to surge forward. Judge Worden stood up and waved them back. They disregarded him, stopping and returning to the background only when the sheriff's deputies strung themselves out along the floor, hands significantly on the butts of their guns.

"Bled to death," said Cannon. "Your work, Burke. Split the artery in his wrist, didn't you? Habit of yours?"

"Maybe so," said Pecos, narrow-eyed. "I wasn't paying any attention to Wendell after he was down. If I had," he ended meaningly, "maybe I'd've stopped the bleeding."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning that I recollect where you were standing, Cannon! You could see Wendell all the time from your position. You watched him bleed to death, watched him and didn't lift a finger to help him. Why, Cannon? Because dead men tell no tales?"

"Shut up, Burke!" The sheriff's face was suddenly white with passion. "There's been nothing but trouble here since you came. First Marshal Talley, now Wendell. Judge Worden, I'm charging Pecos Burke with the murder of Jake Wendell!"

THE judge's eyes shifted longingly toward the bar before returning to Cannon. He wet his fat lips thirstily. "On what grounds?" he asked.

"On grounds you, yourself, mentioned," Cannon snapped. "False arrest and felonious assault. When death results from such acts, the law says it's murder."

Pecos' eyes grew narrow. "I could pick plenty of holes in that kind of logic," he said, "but I'm not troubling to. Are you arresting me, Cannon?"

Cannon hesitated. Drawing on this stranger would be no picnic—better not to try it, use some other method on a man who had broken a lynch-rope with a quick shot, shattered Wendell's wrist with a shot that must have been as quick.

Cannon's eyes strayed beyond Pecos until they saw one of his deputies at the far end of the bar. The deputy was silently drawing his gun and nodding to him. But Cannon, dressing like a gambler, didn't quite have a gambler's poker-face. Pecos read that he was being covered from behind, knew that he had to think and think fast, then act.

Pecos measured the distance to the open door—about twelve feet, and he was almost in line with it. Cannon was at his left, a couple of feet away from the bar. Behind him, at the end of the bar where it curved, he knew from Cannon's glance that someone had drawn a gun on him, probably one of the deputies. In front, between him and the door, cutting off his escape was Stew Mosher.

"You win," said Pecos briefly. He advanced to meet Stew Mosher halfway, his arms extended. The deputy produced the handcuffs, grinning evilly at him. "This is your finish, stranger," he said.

"No, yours," Pecos whispered low.

With the words, close up, hands dropping suddenly, he sent his knee violently up into the deputy's middle. Without waiting to see the effect of the blow, he ducked, swung around low, keeping an arm-grip on Mosher's belt—the whole movement was executed in a time-tick. He was behind the deputy, shielded by his body. Mosher had doubled forward in agony from the kneeing, but Pecos still gripping with his arm, sent it brutally up until its fore part locked beneath the deputy's chin, straightening him out. At the same time his free hand, unholstering one of Mosher's guns, brought it down crashing on Mosher's head.

The gun twirled in his hand and came muzzle foremost. The man at the far corner of the bar, still poised for the undelivered shot, had held his fire on seeing Mosher between him and his intended victim. Pecos, on quick glance, fired. The man fell out of sight behind the bend of the bar.

Pecos moved backward crouchingly, dragging the unconscious deputy with him.

Meanwhile the saloon was in an uproar. Tables, chairs, had been overturned in a mad scramble for shelter from possible bullets. The deputies held their fire, afraid of hitting Mosher. Cannon, ready to send a bullet into Mosher so that he could get at Pecos, refrained because of the thought that he would have to discharge two bullets to his enemy's one, giving a man as quick as Pecos a double chance at him.

Pecos had reached the threshold, had stepped over it backward, was out on the Tivoli's porch. Steve Mosher's feet cleared the sill, Pecos kicked the door to, whistled softly, heard his horse, close by, gently whinny an answer, fired three quick shots through the closed door to discourage possible pursuit for at least a few valuable seconds, and dragging the inert body off the porch, hoisted and heaved it across the saddle like a sack of potatoes.

Then, seizing a stirrup strap instead of mounting, he gave his horse the signal to be on its way, running beside it—a trick he had learned from the Apaches, who used it mostly to rest their tired mounts but sometimes to save a second's time when a quick getaway was needed. It was surprising how fast a man could run by this method, once he got the hang of it.

By the time the crowd found the courage to erupt from the saloon, the shouts

they raised were already coming to Pecos as though from a distance. Nor did the crowd have any way of telling which direction Pecos had taken, the night mist quickly laying the dust and the ground being hoof-marked by many horses other than the one Pecos rode.

It was a good night's work, Pecos thought as he ran.

He had taken prisoner the man he wanted.

CHAPTER III

Mock Trial

THE next day Boonetown hummed with excitement, not only from the events of the night before, but at the news that John Masters had been removed from jail and taken to the courthouse to be tried for the murder of Sheriff Cannon's brother. The news, spreading like wildfire, soon filled the courtroom to capacity. Twelve worried-looking men sat in the jury box, worried because the sheriff's deputies had taken seats on the two benches nearest the box, silently threatening.

Judge Worden came in, took his seat on the raised platform behind the rude high desk. The trial began. John Masters was called to speak in his own defense. He was nervous, wondering what had happened to Pecos Burke, wondering too why his son wasn't present. He hadn't been told what had happened in the Tivoli the night before.

The presence of Pecos Burke might have explained the calling of the trial so quickly after the attempted lynching, but with Pecos Burke absent it looked more like Sheriff Cannon's work. If that was so, something was wrong.

John Masters remembered how Pecos Burke had persuaded him to return to town, arguing that he would be safe there. But how could Pecos guarantee his safety if Pecos wasn't there? John Masters felt hollow inside. Maybe Pecos had deserted him.

"It was close to midnight," John Masters began in a strained voice. "Me and my son was just turning in when we heard knocking on the back door. I stuck my head out of the window and asked who it was. It was Dave Cannon and some others. Dave Cannon said he wanted to talk to me about something. I said it was late and for him to come see me in the morning. I shut down the window, thinking they would go away, but they started to hammer hard on the door. I figured they were drunk, so me and my son started downstairs, aiming to unlock the door and reason with 'em.

"But just as we got down, they broke the door in. They were drunk, sure enough. Dave Cannon had his gun out and was looking nasty. I saw that my son was in the line of fire if that gun went off, and it looked like it was going to. I hadn't taken off my belt yet so I had my own gun on me. I saw it was either my son or young Cannon. You can't stop to think twice when you get a choice like that. I drew quick, hoping I could smash Dave Cannon's gun out of his hand, but the light was bad. He got my bullet in his chest. But that was because just then he turned a mite.

"Looking back, it seems kind of like he turned because he saw it wasn't me but my son in the line of his fire. He was just drunk enough, maybe, not to be able to tell us apart for a second."

John Masters paused, turned to look at the jury, then said slowly, "I opine Dave Cannon came to kill me."

In a flash Sheriff Cannon was on his feet, face livid. "That's a lie!" he shouted. He stared with hot eyes at Judge Worden.

The judge instantly turned to the jury. "The defendant is expressing an opinion," he wheezed. "You are to consider only facts in this case, not the opinions of anyone. Disregard what the defendant last said. Go on, Masters."

"That's all," Masters muttered. "That's my story."

"Have you any other witnesses?"

"My son—only he's not here. His story would be the same as mine."

"Naturally," Sheriff Cannon put in quickly.

Pete Smiley was next called. John Masters burst out with: "Are you going to listen to a hombre who took part in trying to lynch me?"

Judge Worden, rapping for order with his gavel, snapped, "The defendant, having finished with his own testimony, will please keep silent. Tell your story, Smiley."

Smiley twisted his hat in his big hands as he gave his testimony. "Dave Cannon went over to Masters' spread to ask him if he'd taken in any strays, being as Dave's men had come in with a count that was considerable short. He asked some of us boys to come along. If Masters says we were drunk, he's lying. We didn't break the door in. Masters opened it for us. Dave started to tell him about the strays but before we knew it Masters pulled his iron and plugged him. Then he ordered us off his spread—"

"And as you were leaving," Masters broke in excitedly, "I remember what you said! Yes, I remember now! You were drunk and you didn't know how loud you voice was. You said 'We should have bushwhacked him!' "

"Order! Order in the court!" Judge Worden's face grew purple.

Pete Smiley's voice rose above the judge's. "I never said anything like that!"

"Next witness," Judge Worden thundered.

"Deputy Sackman," Sheriff Cannon announced.

ONE of the deputies rose from the bench, went up on the platform, quickly took the oath and sat down.

"Were you one of the deputies who arrested Masters?" Sheriff Cannon asked.

"Yes."

"Masters says his door was broken in. Did you see any signs of anything like that?"

"No. The door was all right."

"That's all, Sackman."

"It's a lie!" Masters choked. The heavy hand of a deputy clamped down on his shoulder.

"Quiet, Masters," Cannon said very sharply. "You're callin' too many people liars around here. You say your door was broken in. Did you repair it?"

"No."

"Then how do you account for the fact that when I went out to your place the following afternoon I found the door in place and undamaged?"

"I don't know!" Masters shot back. "You asked me whether I repaired it. How could I? I was in jail, wasn't I? But it was repaired—I know that. My son told me. He went back to the ranch after visiting me in jail and he found the door okay, like nothing had happened to it. Well, there's an explanation for that. While my son was in town, somebody must have gone and repaired that door, destroying the only piece of evidence in my favor."

"Don't make statements you can't support," Judge Worden warned.

"Support or no support, I'm makin' 'em." Masters muttered, but his heart sank. Where was Pecos? Where was his son?

"Next witness."

Pol Edwards, Joe Farrell and the two Mexicans were called in turn. Their testimony was a repetition of Pete Smiley's. "Any further testimony on either side?" Judge Worden asked.

There was none.

"The jury will retire after listening to my instructions, which will be brief. You have heard all the testimony in this case. You are to weigh both sides. If you believe the defendant's story you will acquit him. If you believe the story of the witness, you will convict him. You may retire now."

The jury filed out into the next room and the heavy door was closed and bolted against them. The crowd remained. No one wanted to run the chance of missing the verdict, no matter how long the jury remained out.

John Masters' shoulders sagged, his

head sank down upon his chest. He had seen the silent intimidation of the jurors by the deputies. He knew what the verdict would be. He shouldn't have listened to Pecos Burke. He had put a lot of faith in the young stranger. All faith was gone now.

As a matter of fact John Masters was wrong. Pecos was busy. Dawn had found him down in the cyclone cellar under the Masters ranchhouse, still waiting for Stew Mosher to come to, and incidentally cursing himself for having struck so hard.

There had been a posse out to the house at two in the morning. Jim, Masters' son, had let them search the house from top to bottom, but they had skipped the cyclone cellar, not even thinking about it—probably because there had not been a cyclone in the district for so many years that they naturally forgot the existence of a cyclone cellar on the Masters spread. Jim had come down to tell Pecos about the posse after it had ridden on.

"That's good," Pecos said. "That gives me time to work in. Only" —he rubbed his chin ruefully— "I can't do a devil of a lot of work on a hombre that refuses to come to."

"How about dousing him with some water?"

"No. That's just what I don't want."

Mystified, Jim Masters returned to his sentinel position up above. Pecos sat on a barrel, rolled cigarettes and smoked the time away. Dawn came, and with it some breakfast, brought down by Jim. And finally Stew Mosher regained consciousness. His eyes were open but as yet unseeing, and he was saying: "Water—water—"

Good, Pecos thought to himself.

THERE was a five-gallon bottle of water beside Pecos, almost full. Pecos rocked it. Involuntarily Stew Mosher's tongue came out to lick his lips as his ears caught the sound. Pecos turned up the wicks in the two lanterns, came nearer and held the light up to the prisoner's face.

"Know who I am, Stew?" Pecos asked.

"Take a good look. Pecos Burke. You're down in a cellar with me, alone. Your hands and feet are tied. Remember the Tivoli last night? Remember what happened?"

Terror entered Stew Mosher's face but it was overcome by his thirst. "Water," he repeated, his voice a little stronger. His eyes could see now; they made out the bottle on the floor. He disregarded Pecos, tried to hunch himself toward it. Pecos lifted it on top of a barrel out of his reach.

"Will you talk, Stew?" Pecos said.

The prisoner's eyes spat sudden hate up at him, the lips twisted into an ugly grimace, curses came out of them.

"All right, Stew," Pecos said. "No water then."

Jim Masters, coming down again to say that all was quiet up above, was in time to see a helpless rage seize the prisoner. Mosher writhed and twisted on the floor, tried to separate his hands, his feet. This lasted about a minute, till he saw it was hopeless.

"Will you talk now, Mosher?"

Mosher looked up with wide staring eyes. There was an instant more of inward struggle, then he asked in a cracked voice. "What do you want to know?"

"Who repaired John Masters' back door?"

"Do I—get water—if I tell?"

"If you tell."

"Zack Purdue, the blacksmith from the Double B spread," the words tumbled out of the prisoner.

"Get over there as fast as you can," Pecos instructed Jim, "and bring Purdue back here, even if you have to knock him on the head to do it."

Jim Masters left. "Water," Mosher pleaded. "You promised."

Pecos filled a glass. Mosher's eyes glared at it greedily—then hate again mixed with his tormenting thirst, for he saw Pecos fill a spoon from the glass. It was the spoon, not the glass, that Pecos put to his lips. The prisoner snapped at it avidly. Pecos had trouble removing the spoon from his mouth. "More," Stew Mosher

panted. "More."

Pecos slowly shook his head. "That ain't all I want to know, Mosher."

The few drops of water had only served to inflame an already flaming thirst. The prisoner drew in his burning tongue. "What else?" he whispered hoarsely.

"Who killed Hank Bellew?"

Mosher's face grew blotchy. He shook his head. "I don't know."

"I know you're lying, Mosher. Lies won't get you water. Who would have bushwhacked Hank Bellew? Who would have bushwhacked Ed Graham? Who would have bushwhacked Sam Burnham? Who had 'em bushwhacked so that afterwards he could buy in their spreads for next to nothing, from their womenfolk? Who wanted John Masters' spread, too, but was afraid to have him bushwhacked because another bushwhacking might start people to thinking, so he picked another way—sent someone over to start a fight with Masters, figuring that Masters could be killed in the fight and the killer could plead self-defense? Answer those questions, Mosher, and you'll get all the water you can drink."

BUT the prisoner was silent. Pecos repeated his questions. The prisoner, cursing, fought with his thirst, made no answer. Another hour passed in this way. Pecos spent part of it in using the writing materials Jim Masters had supplied. Jim came back with company—Zack Purdue, a squat, frightened looking man, brought in at gun-point.

"They're tryin' my father this mornin'," Jim said in an agitated voice. "Met Bob Dolson on my way over to Purdue's. He told me—said he was goin' into town for it."

"All right," said Pecos. "We'll work fast. Purdue, there's a paper here for you to sign. It says that on August Twenty-third you repaired a broken down door at this house, making it look like nothing had happened to it."

"It was a job of work," the blacksmith stammered. "I don't know nothing else. Someone came to my place—"

"Who?" Pecos interrupted.

"Jake Wendell. He came to my place and asked me to come over here to fix a door. After I'd done it, he told me to keep quiet about it, or some night I might find myself with hot lead in my back. That's all I did—fix the door. I don't know anything about any killing, or any trial, or anything else. I just did a job and got paid regular for it."

"Which is no crime," Pecos said quickly, "so you're running into no trouble by signing."

The blacksmith's eyes popped as Pecos, affixing his own name as witness, added something to it. Jim Masters was equally astonished. Pecos smiled grimly and muttered, "Ye-ah, that's who I am. All right, Purdue. You can go now." Pecos turned his attention back to Mosher. "Well, Mosher?"

The pulses throbbed in the prisoner's temples. His face looked fevered. Pecos tilted the water bottle and let some of its contents spill to the floor. "The water's cool and wet as it slips down a man's throat. There's another paper here, Mosher. It's for you to sign. Speak and you get water. Hold your tongue and you get fire. Who killed 'em?"

The answer came like a flaming snarl out of the prisoner's throat. "I did! Gimme water—water!"

"Not yet. Who had 'em killed? Who paid you to do it?"

"Sheriff Cannon!"

"Right. Who owns their spreads now? The real owner, I mean—not the dummies whose names went on the deeds and who are really only foremen. Who owns 'em?"

"Sheriff Cannon."

"All right. Untie his hands, Jim, and let him sign."

Mosher's eyes strained toward the water; his whole body shook with an animal eagerness. He took the pen automatically, signed, hurled himself on the glass Jim Masters held out to him. Half its contents spilled over his chin and down his chest.

"More," he panted, "more!"

CHAPTER IV

Justice

PECOS and Jim curved around Boonetown and entered from the back. The town was quiet—accounted for by the fact that its entire population had crowded into the courthouse. They dismounted and approached the courthouse on foot. Jim Masters carried extra weapons collected at the ranch.

Pecos, coming close to the dead wall, moved stealthily toward the east porch. Peering furtively around the edge for a quick glimpse, he saw that there was one man on it, armed with a rifle and standing by the near side of the closed window. Pecos quickly drew in his head. That hombre would have to be gotten rid of.

Pecos took off his boots, had another quick look. The deputy's back was partly toward him. With catlike tread Pecos crossed the porch, came up behind this man and brought the butt of his revolver down on his head. The deputy sank without a sound and Pecos dragged his body back behind the wall. Then, with Jim, he crawled until he reached the window.

Cautiously raising himself, he looked in. He rose and flattened himself against the wall. Then, turning, he raised the window, stuck one leg in and an arm—the arm held a revolver—and at the same time let a sharp "sh-h-h" escape him.

He drew in his other leg. Jim Masters followed him. They were in the jury room. Twelve men, their faces registering different degrees of amazement and fright, were looking at them.

A little later the crowd in the court heard a sharp knock. "Open the door," Judge Worden called to the deputy standing near it. "Let the jury come out."

The deputy slipped back the bolt, the door was thrown open. The deputy recoiled. Two arms protruded from the doorway, each with a gun in its hand, and a voice called, "Hold your seats, everybody."

Pecos Burke stepped out, brushed past the deputy carelessly since Jim Masters was already covering him.

"Get down on all fours," Jim ordered the deputy, "and crawl to the aisle." The jury room, being almost on line with the judge's bench, permitted him to cover the courtroom from his position while Pecos, gently waving his guns, made a crablike advance toward Judge Worden. The jurors had filed out, entered the box.

"Stay put," Pecos snapped at Judge Worden, quietly taking up a position behind him, his two guns commanding the courtroom. "Everybody keep quiet! Nobody make a move!"

The faces of the jurors were working with suppressed excitement. The crowd saw that six of them had guns. In low tones Pecos said to Judge Worden, "Now you can go on."

The fat lips of the judge moved but his throat was paralyzed with fright. At last he managed to stammer out. "The jury will rise."

The jury rose.

"Have you reached a verdict?"

The foreman said, "We have."

"What is your verdict?"

"John Masters is not guilty."

The murmur in the courtroom swelled. The eyes of Judge Worden strayed to Sheriff Cannon. Almost imperceptibly Cannon shrugged his shoulders, as if to say: "We'll take care of this later. In the meantime, adjourn court."

"The prisoner is released," Judge Worden said. "Court adjourned."

"Judge Worden's mistake!" Pecos cried. "Court's still sitting!" He threw a quick glance at the foreman, who nodded understandingly. Producing some papers the foreman cleared his throat.

"There's some on this jury," he began, "those with the guns being the ones the stranger figured he could trust—who figures that folks would like to know how we come by our verdict—"

"That isn't necessary," interrupted Judge Worden, looking anxiously toward Cannon. The deputies on the benches adjoining the jury box did the same.

The foreman continued: "We don't want folks to think it was a brace of six-guns that persuaded us. It wasn't guns. It was these papers here. The first is a statement by Zack Purdue that he found Masters' back door broken down and that he repaired it. Jake Wendell gave him the job and told him to keep quiet about it."

THE atmosphere of the courtroom grew tense. Pecos watched narrowly. This was delicate work. There was grave danger of an explosion. In the packed room that might mean massacre. He caught the foreman's eye.

The foreman nodded, whispered something to the juror next to him. The word was passed along. The six armed jurors silently covered the deputies. The foreman's lips moved, muttering something. The crowd saw the deputies, one by one, gingerly unholster their weapons and drop them to the floor. Pecos breathed easier, keeping one eye on Cannon.

"The second paper," the foreman announced, "is signed by Stew Mosher—"

The name had hardly escaped his lips when Sheriff Cannon, desperate-faced, was seen to leap to his feet like an animal at bay. The ivory handle of his gun flashed in the sunlight streaming through the windows, its muzzle spat flame. But the stranger up on the platform behind the judge, triggering with the speed of light, spat back a bullet that must have been the twin of the one that had indirectly caused the death of Jake Wendell. The sheriff's gun clattered to the floor, drenched with the blood of his shattered wrist.

Judge Worden began to slump forward out of his chair. Blood ran down his expanse of white shirt front. For the bullet from Sheriff Cannon's gunfire intended for Pecos, had plowed into Judge Worden's neck. Judge Worden was dead.

"I want you alive, Cannon!" Pecos cried. "Otherwise I'd have drilled your heart! Tie up his wrist, Jim, and bring him up into the prisoner's box. It's time you got out of it, Masters."

When the exchange had been made, when Sheriff Cannon took his place in the box vacated by his late prisoner, Pecos again spoke.

"Reckon it's time I introduced myself. I'm Pecos Burke, chief peace-officer for the Territory, down here to find out a few things. Land office records showed that a powerful lot of range in these parts had been passing over to a Frank Miller. But before that they had passed over to other parties, and in each case it so happened that the next previous owner hadn't exactly died in bed. Well, Frank Miller was a name once used by a Lewis Dorgan, and Lewis Dorgan had a record, and I had Lewis Dorgan's picture. John Masters' note came and I started out a day ahead of time, and when I saw Sheriff Cannon, I knew he was Lewis Dorgan. Stew Mosher I sized up as Cannon's hired killer, so everything in the Tivoli last night broke out just right.

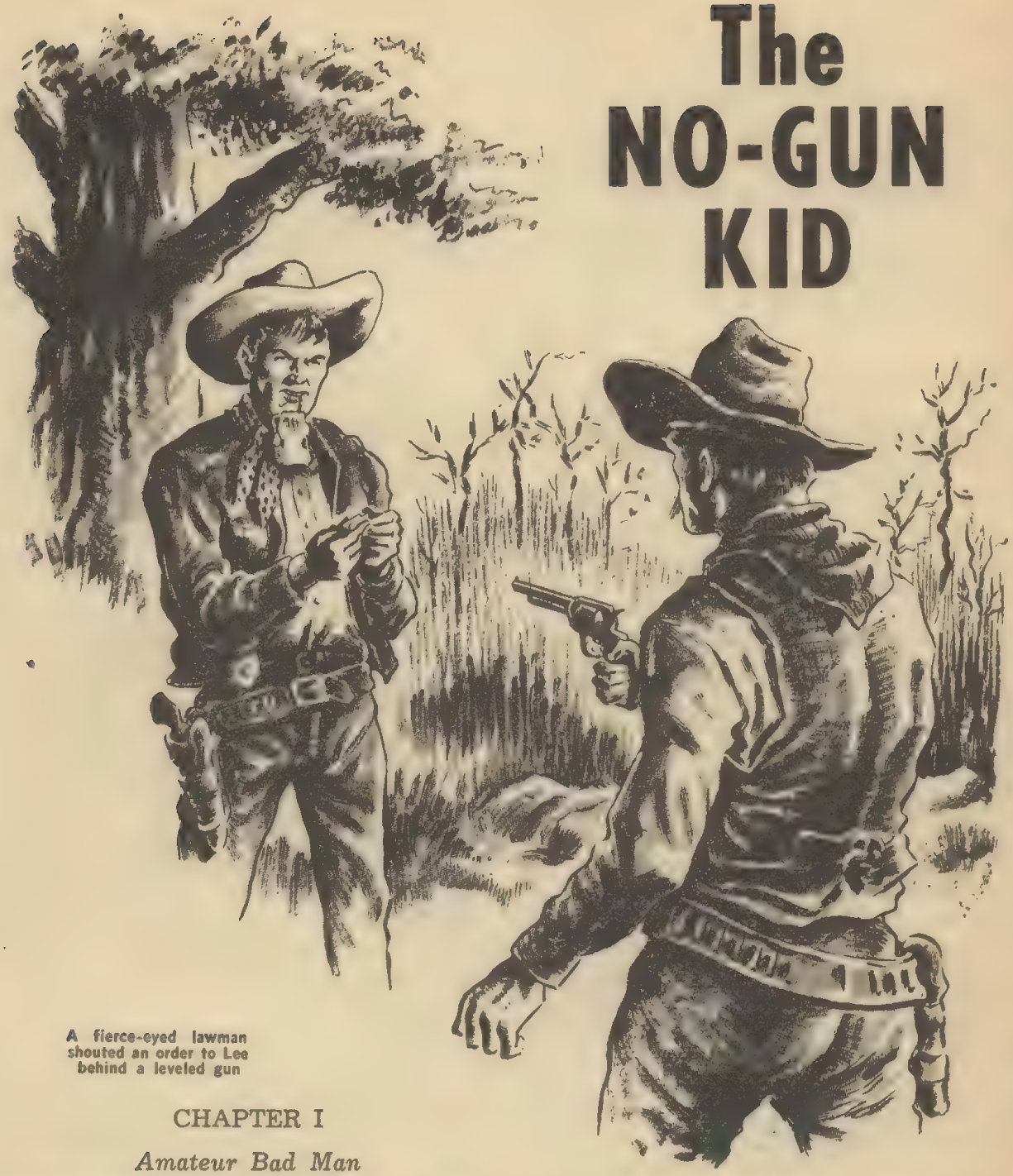
"Cannon, or Dorgan, had big eyes for Masters' spread too, only he was wary of doin' the same thing over again. Instead, he sacrificed his brother to his dirty work, but it didn't pan out the way he expected, Dave Cannon gettin' himself killed on the job. For some reason Cannon was afraid of Masters' trial, so he tried to have him lynched. That failing, he decided to rush the trial through. The rest you know. Cannon and his crowd are going to your jail until they're picked up by my own deputies, who ought to be along here today or tomorrow. They didn't come with me because I figured too many strangers here might set Cannon to thinking."

Pecos' face grew sad.

"I'm only sorry," he said, "that in doing this job a good man had to lose his life—Marshal Talley. I'd give my own life to bring him back, but I guess that can't be done. Line up, you varmints!" he cried with harsh authority. "Stick out your dirty hands an' have 'em tied. The rope's only goin' around your hands—you can be thankful I won't let folks lynch you."

John Masters approached Pecos. The old man couldn't speak, could only extend his hand. Pecos Burke's face softened. He took the old man's hand. "Thanks for sending me that note." Pecos said quietly.

The NO-GUN KID



A fierce-eyed lawman shouted an order to Lee behind a leveled gun

CHAPTER I

Amateur Bad Man

THREE men sat by a small fire in a clearing. One was big and broad and blackbearded. The second was of average build with cold features and hard jaw. The third was much older than his companions and possessed a pair of bright blue eyes which sparkled in the firelight. Close by a young man lay flat on his back, lids closed, face passive in unconsciousness.

"He ought to be coming to pretty soon. He's been out about an hour." It was the oldster who spoke.

The big man grunted. "Somebody socked him with a bag of shot."

"What you aim to do with him?"

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Though deprived of his Colts, Lee Bedford is ready to call a showdown that will make Concho unhealthy for Border ruffians!

A Novelet by PAUL EVAN LEHMAN

"Use him. It won't cost us anything, he bein' plumb full of gratitude. You see, I dragged him out of that fire. I saved his life."

"*You* did?" The older man's eyebrows moved upward.

"Sure. He was out; he won't know the difference. Bet you he'll jump at the chance to hold the horses for us."

The third member spoke flatly. "We can pull this off without help. This man might be a deputy or a Ranger for all we know. I say leave him here."

The big man fixed his keen eyes on the speaker. "Beyond that stretch of woods where we aim to leave the horses it's

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open clear to the road. We got to sneak up afoot. The horses have got to be ready for a quick getaway. It will take all three of us to handle the stuff."

"Easy, Sam; he's waking up," cautioned the old man.

The prostrate man moved. His eyes flickered open, then closed again. He felt languid, drowsy, as yet but dimly conscious of the throbbing in his head. As his strength returned, his memory came with it. Vaguely the events of the past few hours crossed his mind.

He had ridden into Juniper with a thousand dollars in a money belt about his waist and the knowledge that he had been followed all the way from Concho. He had dismounted before a saloon and had gone inside. There he had been attacked and felled from behind. As he was going down somebody had shot out the lights and one of them had exploded. His last memory was of flowing, burning oil licking at his boots.

HIS eyes flew open and he jerked to a sitting position thinking to find himself engulfed in flames. For a moment he stared at the harmless campfire and the three men crouched about it, then sank weakly back to the ground and once more closed his eyes.

The big man came over to him, flask in hand.

"Drink this," he ordered.

Lee Bedford sat up and drank. "How did I get here?" he asked. "Last I remember I was about to flop in a puddle of burning oil."

"You flopped, all right, and got your boots singed some. I dragged you out before you cooked. It was a close shave. We picked out what we figured was your horse, threw you over him, and brought you here. These gents that tackled you sure meant business."

Lee's hand went to his waist. The shirt had been pulled from his overalls and the money-belt was gone.

"They got it," he said wearily. "One thousand dollars. And they'd have got me if it hadn't been for you. Reckon I won't forget what you did."

Sam waved a careless hand. "That's all right, kid. Here: slap this wet rag against that lump on your coco and take it easy for a spell. Cherry, throw some chuck together; Speed, water those horses."

"Cherry Lingo," he explained to Lee, "is a danged good cook and handy man. Speed Tolson is lightning with a six. I'm Sam Cass. We are—uh—prospectors." Sam Cass chuckled heavily.

Lee Bedford said nothing. These men were no more prospectors than he was a sheepherder, but it was not for him to question. He propped a blanket beneath his sore head and watched while Cherry prepared supper.

Cass puffed steadily on a stubby pipe. Speed Tolson watered the horses, then sat down and stared moodily into the flames. Bedford noticed that his face was hard and saturnine and that he possessed the shallow, colorless eye of the killer.

Presently Cherry Lingo announced supper, and Lee joined the others by the fire. He ate some of the food and drank three cups of strong coffee. By the time the meal was concluded he felt well enough to volunteer to clean up the pans.

"Let Cherry do it," said Cass. "I want to talk with you." He lighted his pipe and sucked on it until it was going good. "A while back you said you wouldn't forget what I did. Well, I got just one favor to ask of you, and after that we're quits." Lee nodded, and he went on. "It ain't much. Me and the boys got a job of work to do, and we need a fourth man to hold our horses for us. That's all—just hold our horses."

Suspicion was bright, but Lee could not hesitate. "I'll hold 'em."

"Good. Now turn in. We've got some riding to do in the morning, and you'll want that head to clear up."

Day was just breaking when they saddled up and rode slowly eastward, driving a pack mule ahead of them. When the animals had warmed up the pace was increased. For five hours they rode steadily, then Cass halted them in a shallow basin

hemmed in with brush and scrub pine.

"We'll rest here. Pull your tigs and stake out the horses. Cherry, trot ahead and sort of scout the—uh—diggin's."

The oldster cared for his mount, then slipped through the chaparral.

Cass spoke carefully. "It's this-away, kid. We aim to take some gold for our claim, but like all prospectors who have located a paying claim, we're kind of shy at leadin' a stranger to it." He broke off to grin at Lee.

"So you'll stay here and hold the horses. When we come back, you turn 'em over to us and pull your stakes. That ends your connection with us, and me and you are square."

An hour later, Cherry Lingo came threading his way through the brush.

"Get ready," he said briefly.

SAM and Speed leaped to their feet, and Lee could sense their eagerness.

"Saddle up," ordered Cass. "Lingo, you take care of the pack animal. Me and Speed will do the rest. Come on, kid, catch up your horse."

In a few minutes the animals stood waiting. Cass turned them over to Bedford. "You stick right here till we come back."

Speed Tolson swore throatily. "Sam, can't you and Lingo handle this? If this gent ain't dumber than a Digger Injun, he can easy guess that we aim to hold up a gold shipment. If he walks off with these horses, we're left high and dry. I'm against it, and that's flat."

The eyes of the big man hardened. "Listen, Speed. We need a fourth man. This is him. We got to trust him. Now quit your beefin' and come along."

For ten long seconds the gunman glared at Lee. At last he swore and turned away. Cass stared after him; Cherry Lingo followed with the pack mule.

The brush swallowed them and presently the sounds of their progress died. Lee waited tensely. The minutes dragged.

A shot sounded, perhaps a quarter of a mile away. Another boomed—then a third. The faint echo of a voice uttering orders came to Lee, followed by silence. Then, suddenly, a whole fusillade of reports rang out.

Lee heard shouts and yells of consternation. Were the robbers making their getaway, shooting to discourage pursuit? Or had—

From some point ahead of him came the crash of dry underbrush, the breaking of tree branches. The four horses lunged and milled about Lee, demanding all his attention. Then from the fringe of trees burst Cass, Tolson, and Lingo, running in long strides, apprehension written on their faces. Tolson and Cass turned and emptied their weapons into the tangled brush behind them, then made for the group of horses once more.

The animals, thoroughly frightened by now, lunged back on the reins. Lee's feet became entangled in a vine and he went down, still clinging to the reins. Cherry Lingo was first to reach him. He was swearing angrily.

"I told 'em I wouldn't stand for no killings!" He yanked Lee Bedford to his feet, seized the reins of his mount, and vaulted into the saddle. In his haste he pulled the reins from Lee's hands. Two of the animals wheeled and ran, but Lee prevented his own mount from following by leaping forward and seizing the bridle.

Cass and Tolson ran up, panting and furious.

Cass uttered a string of oaths. "You turned those horses loose on purpose!" He aimed a swipe at Lee's head with his empty gun, but Bedford ducked the blow.

"Told you he was a double-crosser!" blazed Tolson. Only the fact that his gun, too, was empty prevented his killing Bedford then and there.

Lee tossed the reins of his own horse to Cass. "Get on and ride!"

Cass swung into the saddle and wheeled the animal. "Up behind, Speed! Make it fast! We'll settle with this gent later."

The horse, bearing its double burden, leaped forward.

Lee glanced about him swiftly. Already he could hear the crash of brush

where the pursuers were breaking through. Before he could seek the safety of the trees a horseman came into view. Another followed, then half a dozen more. To run was futile, and Lee could not bring himself to lift his gun against the law. He reached for his tobacco sack and started to roll a cigarette.

They surrounded him, weapons leveled. A lean, fierce-eyed man shouted an order and the rest of the posse spurred in pursuit of the three bandits. Lee finished rolling his cigarette, reached deliberately for a match. He tried to keep his hand from trembling as he applied the flame.

The fierce-eyed man swore admiringly. "Danged if you ain't a cool one, kid. But you'll be a heap cooler when you come out of where this day's work is goin' put you."

CHAPTER II

The Girl

JUDGE BLAINE spoke deliberately, sternly. "Sam Cass, Speed Tolson and Lee Bedford, the jury has found you guilty on one or more counts as charged and it is my duty to pronounce sentence.

"Sam Cass and Speed Tolson, I can find no sympathy for you, nor can the jury. One of you shot the guard while his hands were in the air, the other murdered an inoffensive driver.

"On Friday of next week the sheriff of this county will take you into the prison courtyard and hang you by your necks until dead. And may God have mercy on your souls."

Cass uttered a roar of rage and sprang toward the bench. Deputies seized him and held him by the arms. He heaved and squirmed his face above the black beard convulsed with fury.

"By Godfrey, you ain't hangin' me, you pasty-faced hyena! I'll wriggle out of that noose and come back to settle with you! I'll fill you so full of lead it'll take ten men to cart you to Boot Hill. So help me, I will!"

Still cursing he was dragged from the room. Tolson went quietly enough but before he left, he bent a look of unutterable hatred on the judge and spoke in a flat voice which sent shivers up and down young Bedford's spine.

"You passed sentence on me, now I'll pass it on you. I'll be back, and I'll plant a slug plumb smack between those superior eyes of yours."

A moment later Lee Bedford stood alone facing the judge. He felt suddenly weak and panicky. Thoughts of the girl among the spectators steadied him. From the first he had noticed her eyes upon him, and from the sympathy in their depths had come the courage to hold his head high even when he felt that the struggle was useless.

It was the thought of imprisonment that crushed him. To be caged within the walls of a cell would be, to him, worse than death. When visions of dank grey stones and iron bars oppressed him, he had sought the face of the watching girl. He wanted to look at her now. The man on the bench looked at him.

The judge spoke. "Lee Bedford, the jury has found you guilty as an accessory, but has recommended the mercy of the court. I think we were all touched by your simple, straight-forward story.

"You came to Juniper with one thousand dollars which you had labored and skimped to save in order that you might buy cattle on a drought-lowered market, fatten them and sell at a profit.

"At Juniper you fell among thieves, and Sam Cass, unbelievable as it seems, played the good Samaritan and saved your life. In return for this you agreed to hold the horses of the robbers, thinking it a small price to pay for your life.

"You were wrong in that you deliberately broke the law. But I, like the jury, set a high value on a man's loyalty, and as a man not as a judge. I honor you for it. You even went so far as to sacrifice your chance of liberty by turning your horse over to your rescuer. You were a victim of your own gratitude.

"I am inclined to be lenient with you, but first I have a request to make. There was another man in the holdup. He escaped, and he was not seen distinctly enough to be identified, but the sheriff has rounded up several suspects, and if you will pick out the guilty man, you will be given your liberty. Sheriff, bring in the suspects."

The officer signaled to a deputy, a door at the side of the courtroom opened, and through it filed four men, closely guarded. Among them was Cherry Lingo.

Lee's heart gave a mighty surge. The way to freedom was unexpectedly opened. He had only to betray Cherry Lingo. Lingo was nothing to him. Lingo was an outlaw. He had not participated in the killings, but he would have helped rob the stage and would have taken a share of the gold.

BUT Lingo was an old man. And he, too, had been reared to an untrammeled life on prairie and mountain and desert. Prison would kill him as surely as confinement kills the mocking-bird.

Lee's eyes sought out the girl. She was leaning forward, her whole attitude one of anxious expectancy. He felt suddenly as though she had placed him in a balance and was waiting for the scales to show her the man she thought him to be. He felt suddenly tranquil—so tranquil that he smiled at her. Turning back, he faced the judge.

"I'm waiting for you to pronounce sentence, Your Honor."

Judge Blaine frowned. "You refuse to identify the man?"

"The man you want is not a killer, and he befriended me. If I betrayed him, I would be lower than the lowest."

He heard a little stir in the courtroom behind him, like a gust of wind in dry autumn leaves. The judge spoke again.

"I said I was inclined to be lenient with you, but the jury found you guilty and you yourself have closed the door to complete freedom. I therefore sentence you to five years in the state penitentiary—"

A murmur swept through the crowded room, and the judge waited patiently for order. His keen eyes glanced around.

"—but I suspend that sentence on the condition that you never use your gun except in regular range work or to destroy some vicious animal or poisonous reptile."

"Just what does that mean, Your Honor?"

"It means that you are free as long as you obey my mandate; not to use your gun except in regular range work or in the extermination of dangerous animals or reptiles.

"If you violate that condition and are caught, you will have to serve the five years in addition to any other sentence you may incur. Do you accept that condition?"

Lee Bedford felt the eyes of the girl upon him, sensed the message she was trying to flash him. "Your Honor, I accept."

Court was dismissed. The four suspects were freed. A deputy touched Lee on the shoulder.

"Glad you got off, kid. Your horse and outfit will be turned over to you when you have time to drop in at the office. Good luck to you!"

Spectators and jurymen came forward and shook his hand, wishing him well. Judge Blaine descended from the bench.

"I imposed that condition for your own good, my lad. I have not been in this country long, but I have learned that dexterity with a revolver has driven many a man into outlawry. I don't want that to befall you."

"T-thank you, sir." Lee's throat was a bit tight. He turned hastily to find himself looking into the face of the girl. She placed a hand on his arm.

"I'm so glad! You are loyal and brave and honest. And you never faltered."

"I—I reckon you helped a lot, miss. Every time I felt myself slipping I looked at you. It seemed that you were the only one boosting for me, and maybe prayin' for me." The boy flushed with embarrassment. He was not given to exposing his innermost feelings so bluntly.

"I was boosting for you," the girl told

him gently. "And I did pray for you. Somehow I knew that Dad felt the same about you as I did."

Lee's glance was puzzled. "Your dad?"

"Mm-m-m," coughed the judge. "Mr. Bedford, the lady whose sympathy you seem to have stirred is my daughter, Nancy Blaine."

LEE BEDFORD rode out of Concho within the hour. He rode against the earnest solicitations of both Judge Blaine and his daughter for they knew that he was starting on the trail of the missing thousand dollars, and they were apprehensive for his safety.

He rode briskly, because he was anxious to get on with the task, and Juniper was thirty miles away. Cartridge and belt and six-gun were rolled in the blankets strapped behind the saddle. His rifle remained in the boot, but it was unloaded.

Five miles outside of town, he overtook Cherry Lingo. He drew rein, and for a full minute the two men, one young, the other old, exchanged level glances; then Lingo thrust out a horny hand.

Lee shook his head. "No, Cherry. We're quits. Let it go at that. I'll have no truck with outlaws."

"By jacks, I ain't a killer!" said the other man hotly. "Those two got what they deserved. I told 'em I'd have no part in a murder. I'm a outlaw, yes; but son, I'm a danged poor one. Reckon I'm too soft-hearted. And you sure need a friend, a-ridin' without no gun. What did you do with it?"

"It's in my bed-roll."

The oldster swore softly. "You sure are a sticker for keeping your word, ain't you?" Then, as Lee made no reply: "That judge had no right to make you quit packing it. He's fresh from the East and got funny notions about weapons. Why, taking a gun from a man out here is like turnin' him loose on the desert without any water!"

"Well, I'd sure admire to ride the trail with you, but you're right; and if we were seen together some eagle-eyed deputy might put two and two together and get five out of it. But I'll be around if you ever need me. So long, kid."

Lee rode on alone, but later when he turned in the saddle, he saw Cherry some half mile behind him. It was dusk when he entered Juniper. He passed the charred remains of the saloon where he had been robbed and dismounted before a restaurant. It was the supper hour and the place was filled. There were no tables. The patrons were roosting in a row before a lunch counter.

Lee noticed among them several who had been present in the saloon on the night of the robbery. He felt a tightening of the muscles; perhaps one of them was even now wearing his money-belt.

There was an ominous silence when he entered the place. Hostile glances swept his figure, halted at his waist, noticing the absence of the customary six-gun. He made his way to a vacant stool and placed his order. Presently bits of conversation came to his ears.

"He's the gent who caused the Nugget fire."

"Tried in Concho and turned loose without a gun."

"Bet you he got off by double-crossin' Sam and Speed."

Lee Bedford slid from his stool and glanced along the row of backs toward the point from which this last remark had come.

"The man who said that is a liar!" he stated flatly.

Instantly a customer some half-dozen feet away spun on his stool, reaching for his weapon at the same time.

Bedford leaped at him, his eyes fastened on the hand which clutched the half-drawn gun.

It was a wild, desperate chance, but he had to take it. He could not reach the fellow's wrist, but did manage to grab the long barrel of the Colt. The weapon roared and Bedford felt the bullet pluck at his trouser's leg. With a sudden wrench he tore the gun from the man's hand and threw it behind him.

Closing swiftly he grappled with the fellow, pulling him from the stool. His

opponent was twenty pounds heavier than he, but Lee was fired with a burning indignation. He saw that the fellow was one of those who had attacked him in the saloon, and the knowledge lent him strength.

A knee caught him in the body, making him wince. He sank a fist in the other's midsection, then knocked him cold with a right to the chin. The man's eyes glazed, and Lee Bedford closed again and, seizing him about the waist, hugged his limp form closely to him.

OTHERS had turned, some of them with guns in their hands, all of them with hate in their eyes. Lee backed warily, hanging to his man and keeping the inert body between him and the threatening weapons. He knew they would shoot him like a dog if he gave them half a chance.

His feet struck an object that slid a few inches along the floor. The gun! By kneeling and drawing his burden with him, Lee would be able to snatch it up, thus giving him command of the situation. Remembering his promise to the judge, he kicked the weapon away from him lest the temptation to use it would be too great.

He had backed to the kitchen end of the long counter, with all of the diners before him. They sat or crouched there waiting for him to shift his position, ready to take advantage of the first false move.

One of them spoke suddenly. "Shucks! What are we waitin' for? He hasn't got a gun!" He set the example by leaping towards Lee Bedford.

There was nothing else for Bedford to do. He propelled the inert form of the man he was holding directly at the onrushing assailant. The unconscious man collided with the other and the two went down. Instantly Lee leaped backward through the swinging door. Half a dozen guns thundered, and Lee heard the slugs rip through the flimsy panels.

A cook stood staring. Lee ducked past him, pulled open the door which led to the alley, and darted through the opening. He reached the corner and rounded it, ran swiftly through a passageway leading toward the sidewalk. He hit the planks on the run, turned toward the hitch-rack, then swerved abruptly and plunged into the street. The change of direction was necessitated by the fact that two men were guarding his horse.

One of them uttered a yell at sight of him and let fly. The slug nicked Lee's shoulder and threw him off balance. Then he was hidden by the darkness of the road, the thick dust muffling the sound of his footsteps. Leaping to the walk on the far side of the street, he melted into the shadows of a dark passageway between two buildings. Behind him men were running, shouting questions to the two guards.

Lee halted a moment to catch his breath. His pursuers had mounted the walk on his side of the street, were spreading out to search the passages and alley. The country behind the town was open and flat, and an early moon was just creeping over the horizon. Only in the shadows was safety.

The eaves of the flat-roofed one-story building behind which Bedford was standing extended over the alley just a few feet overhead. He searched swiftly, found an empty keg, upended it, and mounting it, grasped the eaves and swung upward.

He had barely stretched out on the roof when a horseman rode around the corner and halted his mount directly beneath him.

More men appeared in the alley, some of them mounted. They ranged back and forth, searching the shadows, brave in the knowledge that their quarry was unarmed. Border riffraff every one of them and friends of Sam Cass without doubt. Bedford's escape, unarmed and in face of such odds, rankled them.

Below Lee Bedford sat a horseman, waiting, a vague blur in the shadows of the building. His hat was but a foot or two beneath the eaves. If Lee could but gain possession of the horse!

Tingling with excitement and intensity of purpose, he slowly and noiselessly gathered himself for the effort. To the very

edge of the roof he crept, eyes upon the crown of the fellow's hat. Carefully he raised to a sitting position, dropped his legs over the eaves. The hat jerked around as its owner sensed his danger.

Lee thrust himself forward and dropped.

As he fell he grasped the man, intending to drag him from the saddle and seize the reins. Unfortunately, his feet struck the upended keg which promptly toppled with him.

He succeeded in pulling the rider from the saddle, but the horse, startled, broke away.

Men closed in from both sides, hurrying to their companion's aid. With the other held tightly in his arms, Lee Bedford was flung to the ground and smothered beneath the weight of many bodies. Slowly the pile untangled and somebody struck a match.

The man in Lee's grasp squirmed around to face him.

It was Cherry Lingo.

CHAPTER III

From Frying Pan to Fire

BEDFORD'S captors took him into a large one-room cabin illuminated by a single kerosene lamp. There were six of them in addition to Cherry Lingo, and Lee, looking them over, decided that they were the hardest bunch he had ever tangled with.

"What do I aim to do with him?" said Jake Kloss. "I aim to burn a double-cross smack on his forehead. Reckon that's what Sam Cass would want his old friend, Jake Kloss, to do under the circumstances. Ain't the first time I've done it, neither."

Jake Kloss applied a match to the kindling in the stove and blew on the flames until they roared. Satisfied at last, he pushed an iron poker into the fire and glared at his prisoner.

Lee glanced desperately about. His only chance of escape seemed to lie with Cherry Lingo, but thus far the oldster had given no sign that he intended to help him.

He was standing within five feet of Lee, and Bedford knew that a sudden leap, carrying with him the chair to which he was tied, would enable him to snatch the gun from Cherry's left holster. But there was the promise he had made Judge Blaine. Lee Bedford did not give his word lightly, and when he did it was worth more than his bond.

The sharp *clip-clop* of hoofs caught their attention, grew in volume as the horseman neared the cabin, ceased outside the door. Somebody rapped sharply. Jake Kloss opened the door a crack.

"Cherry Lingo in there?" came the terse question.

"He is. What do you want?"

"I got to see him. Sam Cass sent me."

All eyes were turned on the doorway. Lingo flashed a quick glance at the prisoner, stepped quickly behind the chair to which he was tied. Lee felt the hemp go slack as Cherry Lingo severed it. His hands and feet were not bound.

The oldster stepped forward before his nearness to the chair could be noticed. "Let him in, Jake," he ordered.

The door swung open and a man entered. He told his story excitedly.

"Sam and Speed broke away like they said! Just when they were getting on the stage to go to the pen. Sam was in front, with a deputy behind him. After the deputy came Speed, and then the sheriff.

"Sam made out like he'd tripped over something and the deputy leaned over to help him, Sam being handcuffed. Speed snatched out the deputy's gun, blowed off the top of his head, then wheeled and covered the sheriff before he knowed what it was all about!"

The man stopped for breath and went on: "Sam took the sheriff's shotgun. They held back the crowd, swiped horses from a hitch-rack, and split the breeze. Stopped at my place to get the cuff chains cut and sent me ahead to tell Lingo to rustle fresh horses for them— Hey! Who's that gent?"

They whirled, but Lee, moving silently, had reached the rear of the cabin. He

yanked open the door and flung himself through an instant before they started shooting. He could hear the lead plunking into the logs and whining through the air as he ran swiftly out on the open flat behind the cabin. He knew he must find cover at once. In the bright moonlight he made too good a target.

He dived into a slight depression in the foot-high grass an instant before the first of his enemies reached the rear doorway. Their voices came to him as they scattered hurriedly and began a profane search, and presently the thud of approaching boots caused Lee to shrink in apprehension and wish for a gun. The footsteps ceased less than twenty feet from where he sprawled.

"Danged funny where he got to," came the growl of Jake Kloss.

"I don't know," replied Cherry Lingo. "A scared man can run pretty fast."

"He didn't have time to get very far. And he sure didn't circle the cabin. What's that over there?"

"Patch of ground. I saw it right off. Nothing like making sure, though."

LEE heard Cherry approach and sensed the oldster bending over him. He heard a soft thud in the grass beside him, then Cherry Lingo moved away.

"Just a patch of ground like I said. He didn't stop this close, Jake."

Kloss swore. "We got to find him and fix him before he spreads the alarm about Sam and Speed."

"Well, start looking then. I got to see about those horses."

Jake grumbled a reply and moved ahead through the chaparral. Cherry Lingo started back toward the cabin. A minute later Lee cautiously raised his head. He counted six figures kicking about in the grass and scrub.

It would not do to remain here any longer. He squirmed around on his stomach until he was headed for the cabin, remembered the thud he had heard as Lingo had leaned over him, felt about and found a gun.

A surge of elation ran through his blood, and unconsciously his fingers closed around the smooth walnut stock. Then he swore savagely and sent the weapon spinning into the grass. He had escaped with a whole skin thus far without violating his promise; he'd see the thing through to the finish if it was at all possible.

Foot by foot he squirmed his way to the shadows behind the cabin. The rear door stood open, the lamp still smoked on the table in front of the place. A careful survey showed the cabin unoccupied.

Here was the one place where he would be secure. Keeping in the shadow of the rear wall, he wormed his way to the entrance and across the threshold, his ears acutely trained in expectation of the shout which would tell of his discovery.

The expected alarm was not given and once inside the cabin he wiggled along the wall and then got quickly to his feet. There was a pole loft which covered half the interior. Hugging the wall he found the ladder, mounted it swiftly.

He swung his weight upon the poles, felt them sag beneath him. Cautiously he flattened himself on the shaky surface, and took a position which enabled him to see the front door.

Voices sounded at the rear of the cabin, heavy footsteps thudded on the puncheon floor. Jake Kloss and one of his men came into view.

"Danged if I can understand it," declared Kloss. "He ain't got wings."

"Must have circled and hit for town."

"With all us watchin'? It's open ground and a good moon. I tell you a rabbit couldn't get away."

The sudden pound of hoofs caused the speaker to break off. Both men stiffened and faced the door. The rapid thuds approached, stopped abruptly outside the cabin. The door opened and Sam Cass and Speed Tolson entered.

They were haggard and grim. Speed gripped the deputy's gun, and Cass carried the shotgun he had taken from the sheriff. The severed chains of handcuffs dangled below their sleeves.

"Hello, Jake," Sam greeted briefly. "Where's Lingo?"

"Gone for the horses. Sam, I'm glad—"

"Go get him. Wait a minute, give me your gun and belt. You, Kelly, give yours to Speed. We're going to make the fur fly tonight!"

Quickly the men complied.

"Now round up Lingo and send him here a-scooting—both of you. Have the boys gather every horse in town and take 'em across the Border. We don't want that posse to find a single good bronc in town. Jake, you watch and fetch word to us when the posse rides in. Savvy!"

NODDING, the man hurried away. Cass and Tolson examined the borrowed weapons, buckled the belts about them, then seated themselves at the table. Almost immediately Cherry Lingo entered.

Cass greeted him with "You got the horses?"

"They're out back."

"Good! You seen anything of that feller that turned our horses loose?"

"He didn't turn 'em loose, Sam. That was my fault. I pulled the reins out of his hand."

"Yeah, you did! I tell you Speed was right about that gent. Answer my question: you seen him?"

"He was here twenty minutes ago. Jake Kloss and his bunch caught him and brought him in. The kid cut his ropes and beat it. They haven't found him yet."

Sam swore. "A fine outfit this is—to let a kid without even a gun slip through your fingers! If I had my ruthers I'd round him up myself and plant a slug in his carcass where it would do the most good. But I ain't got time.

"Listen, Lingo; we led the sheriff in a big circle just to get him to Juniper with a bunch of worn-out horses. They're run into the ground and he won't find a fresh one within fifty miles. When he pulls in, we pull out."

Lee, peering over the edge of the loft, saw Lingo's eyes narrow.

"Where to?"

"Concho! Back to settle with that pasty-faced Eastern judge. He thought we was talkin' through our sombreros back there in the courtroom. Well, with the sheriff and every able-bodied man in Concho down here lookin' for us, we'll sure wipe that town clean."

"Don't count me in on that, Sam."

"Don't worry! You're too much of a old lady for work of that kind. Me and Speed will do the job, and we'll do it right this time. Come to think of it, that gal of his is a right handsome filly."

Footsteps sounded outside, the door jerked open, and Jake Kloss thrust his excited face through the entrance.

"Sheriff and posse coming down the road! Get goin', Sam!" He pulled the door shut and they could hear his boots pound the earth outside.

All three were on their feet. "Fine!" said Sam. "We'll get those horses and ride. And when we get to Concho . . ."

Lee Bedford crouched on the frail poles of the loft, inhaled some of the dust. Suddenly and violently he sneezed, and as he did so the age-weakened poles cracked beneath him, and fell squarely on the shoulders of Sam Cass!

Instinctively Lee Bedford clutched Sam's shoulders with outstretched hands, and he hit the floor feet first. Cass went down on all-fours, and Lee followed, piling on the big man and forcing both of them partly under the table.

He had a glimpse of Tolson's booted feet on the other side, and, heaving upward, up-ended the table in an effort to trip Speed. Then he rose to his feet in a reckless effort at what seemed to him to offer the only hope of salvation: a swift dash through the rear doorway before either of the two outlaws could throw a shot at him.

But he at once saw the futility of this plan, for Tolson had leaped swiftly to one side, avoiding the table, his gun flicking into his hand as he did so. Even as Lee Bedford straightened, the black muzzle of the six-shooter was completing a short arc which would end in smoke and flame and the abrupt extinction of Lee Bedford.

"Hold it!"

Tolson checked the movement just as his thumb was about to release the ham-

mer of his Colt. Lee saw his narrowed eyes flit swiftly to his right, caught the expression of surprise and chagrin which crossed the evil faces. Cherry Lingo slightly crouched, had him covered with a six-gun. Lingo's face was set and hard and the twinkle had disappeared from his unusually bright blue eyes.

SAM CASS, backing from beneath the table, glared at him in wonder, then swore feelingly.

"Lingo, what are you about? Put that gun down! Down, I tell you!" He had regained his feet, his own weapon covering the oldster. Bedford watched the pair.

Lingo did not remove his gaze from the hot eyes of Speed Tolson.

"You go ahead and shoot, Sam, if you feel like it; but you can't do it quick enough to keep me from drillin' Speed. By Godfrey, I'm not seeing an unarmed man shot in this cabin, especially after what he done for me."

"You're locoed!" bellowed Sam. "He's a double-crossin' skunk! Let Speed finish him here and now or we'll all be sorry for it!"

"Even if you were right, which you're not, a shot would bring that posse down on us before you could light out. They must be in town by now."

Sam thought swiftly. "He's right, Speed. We got to be moving."

"Leave this bird and he'll warn the posse right off."

"Let him! They got no horses to follow." He turned to the defenseless Bedford. "If you think we're done with you, you got another think coming. After we finish our business with your friend the high-falutin' judge and his good-lookin' daughter, I'll hunt you down like you were a rattler in the rocks. Come on, Speed."

Reluctantly the gunman lowered his weapon, and all the venom in his evil soul blazed in eyes he fastened on Bedford. "By jacks, I hate to leave you on your feet. If I was sure these horses are out in back waiting for us, I'd still let you have it, and Lingo be danged!"

He glided past Lee, following Cass to the rear doorway. Bedford relaxed. Cherry lowered his gun and turned to watch them leave the room.

"The horses there all right?" they heard Tolson ask Cass.

"Yeah, they're here. Come a-hopping!"

Speed wheeled suddenly and his gun leaped upward. "You double-crossin' polecat!" he hissed, and released the drawn hammer.

Lee Bedford instinctively ducked and jumped sideward; but Cherry Lingo was even quicker. He threw himself before Bedford, and Lee saw him stagger as the heavy slug struck him. He reeled backward, and if Lee had not caught him, would have fallen. From without came the churn of hoofs. Cass and Tolson had fled.

Gently Lee Bedford lowered Cherry to the floor, opened the coat, tore away the shirt where the crimson showed. The wound was on the left side. With the torn shirt Lee wiped away the blood, revealing a ragged gash along one of the old fellow's ribs.

"Reckon it ain't much," gasped Cherry Lingo.

"It might have been a heap worse, Lingo. You didn't know where that bullet was goin' when you jumped in front of me."

"Dirty trick—shooting an unarmed man. Son, those two are locoed wolves. There ain't a half dozen men left in Concho. I'm worried for that judge."

Lee got to his feet. "I'll take your horse and do what I can to stop them."

"Without a gun?" Cherry Lingo was gazing at him steadily.

"No! I'll borrow yours, and if I have to use it, I will."

"Now you're talkin' sense! Listen: I hid your horse in the barn behind the rest'rant. Your gun and rifle are with your blanket-roll and saddle. You hit for Concho. And don't hesitate none about shooting either Speed or Sam.

"You're under no obligations to either of 'em. Sam never dragged you out of that fire. He told you he did, so that he could

work you into holding the horses. I pulled you out, but you more than repaid me in that court-room. Go fork that horse and forget the promise. Shoot on sight, and shoot to kill!"

Lee pulled a blanket from a window and tucked it beneath Cherry's head, then hurried from the cabin. On the main street of Juniper he found a posse of fully twenty men gathered before one of the saloons. They stiffened as he came into view, then, recognizing him, the men relaxed again.

"Kid, have you seen Cass or Tolson?" asked one of them. "We followed them in here."

"Yes. They just left on fresh horses for Concho. They aim to clean up the town. Where is the sheriff?"

That officer came around a corner leading Lee's saddled horse. "The only critter left in town," he said.

"Jake Kloss and his men took every available one across the Border," Bedford told him, and repeated the information he had given the posse.

"And both Sam and Speed swore they'd get Judge Blaine!" exclaimed the sheriff. "I see now what they did—led us here and left us stranded. Well, I'll go after them alone."

"There's a wounded man in a cabin behind the east alley," Lee told him quietly. "Better send somebody over to look after him."

The sheriff addressed one of the men. "Joe, scoot over there and see if you can fix him up. I got to ride to Concho. Hey, you! Come back here!"

For Lee Bedford had seized the opportunity to fling himself on his horse and, bending low, to jump him into full stride. Before the astonished posse could get into action, he was flying like a specter through the moonlight toward Concho and the girl who had come to mean so very much to him.

The realization hit him like a bolt of lightning. He loved the girl! He needed her! And she needed him, too. For miles ahead of him, riding like centaurs, grim, silent, utterly insensible to all promptings of compassion or decency or manliness, rode two beasts intent to kill.

CHAPTER IV

Wolves on the Loose

FROM over the top of his Eastern newspaper Judge Blaine spoke to his daughter.

"A penny for your thoughts, Nancy."

The girl smiled faintly. "You may have them for nothing, sir. I was thinking of the young man who went after his stolen money alone and unarmed."

"Hm-m-m! I've thought quite a bit of him myself. A likeable chap who will go far if he abandons the way of the gun."

"Will he?" Nancy sighed. "I'm afraid he will not go very far in any direction, Father. I'm not so sure that you did the right thing in forbidding the use of a weapon even in self-defense. I'm beginning to realize that life out here is entirely different from life in the East."

"My child, these people must learn to let the law settle their quarrels. Nobody is justified in taking that prerogative to himself. A killing unauthorized by law is murder." Blaine nodded emphatically.

"Then somebody will have to rid the world of Sam Cass and Speed Tolson. Both those terrible men are at large; your kind of law can't hold them. They are killers—ruthless, savage! And they swore to get even with you. Dad, I'm afraid!"

The judge refused to be disturbed. "There is no danger. If they have not been recaptured, they are far below the Border by this time. And they dare not come back."

"Men of their stamp will dare anything!"

Judge Blaine yawned and got to his feet. "I'm afraid you're a bit worked up, Nancy. It's bed time; I'll lock up and we'll turn in. And if I were you I wouldn't allow my thoughts to dwell on that romantic young Bedford."

Long after the judge had gone to sleep,

Nancy lay open-eyed on her bed, staring at the black void above her. Strive as she would, she could not keep her thoughts off Lee Bedford. He had impressed her as had no other man before him. His gaze was so clear and steady; she liked the way he held his chin.

Young he might be, but resolute, dependable, courageous. She asked herself if it could be possible that she had fallen in love with Lee Bedford, and the sudden clamor of her heart sent the warm color to the cheeks. She was still thinking of him when she dropped to sleep.

A shot awoke her. She lay there listening, tense with an unknown dread. Then came another shot—a yell. Nancy got up and started to dress. She heard footsteps outside her door. "Who's there?" she called sharply.

Her father's reassuring voice answered. "It's I, Nancy." She heard him continue his way toward the front of the house.

Quickly finishing dressing, she unbolted her door and followed. Judge Blaine had opened the shutters to one of the living room windows and she saw that the sun was just coming up.

She moved to his side, peered over his shoulder.

There was no movement in the street, but the air seemed charged, and Nancy had the feeling that others were, like themselves, peering fearfully from behind adobe walls. Abruptly there came another shot and yell. Then the swinging doors of a saloon, diagonally across the street, opened and a man came hurtling through. He fell sprawling, got to his feet, ran blindly and swiftly down the street. He was the saloon proprietor, and Nancy saw that he was but partly dressed.

From the doorway swaggered Sam Cass, the sheriff's shotgun in the crook of one arm. In his free hand he grasped a bottle. Following him came Speed Tolson, six-gun gleaming in the early morning light. Cass raised the bottle, drank deep, then passed it to Speed. Tolson drained the flask, tossed it into the air, and sent it flying in splinters with a snap shot from his six-gun.

FROM a house up the street a man came running. He was coatless, and his open, flapping vest bore a nickled star. Halting, he fired his pistol toward the saloon. Nancy saw Sam Cass wince. Then with a roar of rage he wheeled and raised the shotgun. The unfortunate marshal ran directly into the charge of buckshot. He tumbled forward, plunged face down on the sidewalk, and lay still.

Nancy cried out and shrank away from the window.

"The beasts!" cried the judge. "They are mad; absolutely mad!"

"Come away from the window, Dad! They'll see you and—"

A pistol shot interrupted her, and the glass in the upper sash tinkled to bits, showering the judge with the sharp splinters. Nancy pulled the heavy shutters tight; but before she had finished bolting them she saw Cass and Tolson striding purposefully toward the house.

Only the faint light which filtered between the shutter slats illuminated the room. Nancy got clean cloths and water and proceeded to wipe the blood from her father's face and hands. The cuts were superficial, but bled rather profusely.

She tried to speak calmly. "Father, what shall we do? They are coming over here!"

"They can't get in. The doors and shutters are strong."

Heavy footsteps sounded on the veranda, then a fist banged against the oaken door.

"Open up!" came the harsh voice of Sam Cass. "Ain't no use tryin' to stop us. By jacks, we've come back like we promised!"

The two inside stood close together as though to draw courage each from the other. Cass circled the house trying in turn the rear door and each pair of shutters. He was swearing as he returned to the front of the house.

"Wait here," he ordered Speed. "I'll git 'em out—in a hurry."

The girl and her father exchanged apprehensive glances. Nancy moved to the window. Her father opened the slats and

peered through. Presently she saw Cass stagger from a passageway drawing after him a fifteen-foot section of timber. That it was heavy she could tell by the effort he was exerting.

"They're going to batter down the door," she told the judge through white lips. "Let's slip out the back way while we have the chance."

The judge shook his head. "We'd be playing right into their hands. Once in the open we wouldn't have a chance. I doubt if they would harm you, so you go. I'm safer here."

She set her lips and shook her head. "I stay with you, Dad."

They were not left long in doubt as to the purpose of the two. Their conversation came clearly through air as hushed as though it hung over a city of the dead. They were rigging their lariats to porch timbers in such a way that their battering ram could be suspended horizontally and swung in an arc which would drive its end against the wooden door.

Nancy turned to her father. "Have we a gun in the house?"

"Certainly not. I have never owned one. I doubt if I could use it if we had."

"I could," said the girl grimly. "And if I succeeded in shooting either of those brutes, I do not believe that even you would call it murder."

From the outside came an order from Sam Cass. "Let her go!" It was followed by a crash against the door that jarred the whole house.

The sudden realization of their danger galvanized them into action. The judge seized a heavy walking stick. Nancy ran into the kitchen and armed herself with a butcher knife. White faced, they stationed themselves at the door which was now creaking and groaning at each ponderous stroke of the battering ram.

A PANEL gave. Then another flew into splinters. Finally the whole door was torn from its hinges and fell inward in fragments. Across its shattered remains rushed Sam Cass, shotgun leveled.

"Come on, Speed!" he called triumphantly. "They're both here!"

Judge Blaine sprang forward, the walking stick upraised. As he brought it down, Cass thrust up the shotgun and the stick was broken in two as it struck the barrel. Undaunted the girl's father sprang to attack with bare hands but Cass deliberately kicked him in the stomach. Breathless and nauseated, the judge crumpled on the floor.

Nancy closed in, and the wicked knife flicked out toward Sam. Just in time was he able to parry, but the keen point caught him in the arm, bringing a bellow of pain and rage. Remorselessly he brought the barrel of the gun down on Nancy's head, stunning the girl and knocking her to the floor.

Into the room leaped Speed Tolson, his narrowed eyes alight. He flashed a quick glance toward the dazed girl, then strode over to where the judge lay gasping for breath and kicked him in the side.

"Get up, you white-livered polecat, and take your medicine on your feet." He looked toward the ceiling and gave an exclamation of satisfaction. "Made to order! Those rafters, Sam. By jacks, we'll hang the old hyena in his own house."

"You said it," agreed Sam. "Pick up that girl and tie her in a chair. She watched while he dished out our dose of punishment. Now she'll see when we give him his."

Speed dragged Nancy to a chair and bound her to it with one of the lariats. Sam seized the other and, while Tolson stood guard over the prostrate judge, mounted a table and passed an end over a heavy beam.

"Ain't got much of a drop," he complained.

"So much the better. He'll kick a while before he strangles. Come on, give me that noose."

Judge Blaine, white-faced, slowly got to his feet. He did not falter. His labored breath was coming more easily now. His head was erect and his eyes were flashing when Tolson slipped the loathsome noose about his neck.

"Get up on that chair," Tolson bellowed.

The judge obeyed. Sam drew up the slack in the rope, carried the free end to the living room door and snubbed it about the knob. Blaine, anxiously watching his daughter, saw her raise her head, slowly, wearily. She caught sight of him. Then as the significance of the thing struck her, she screamed wildly, desperately.

"The audience is awake," gloated Sam Cass. "Let her go, Speed!"

Tolson leaped forward and kicked the chair from beneath the judge's feet.

CHAPTER V

The Way of a Gun

DUSTY, haggard with apprehension, Lee Bedford swept into Concho on a lathered staggering pony, which collapsed beneath him a hundred yards from the judge's house. Grimly he worked himself loose, saw that his six-gun was unharmed, then ran as rapidly as riding boots would allow.

Ahead of him on the board walk, lay the figure of a man. Lee reached the place, stopped only long enough to pick up the dropped six-gun, then glanced diagonally across the street.

The judge's house stood before him, shutters tight, apparently intact. Then his eyes were caught by a huge timber projecting from the edge of the veranda and a doorway which yawned wide and dark. As he stood hesitant, there came from within the house the frenzied, terror-stricken scream of a woman. Nancy!

Lee sprang into the street, crossed it swiftly, hurdled the picket fence which inclosed the front yard. Nancy was screaming again. He cleared the veranda steps and as he landed a man appeared in the doorway—a lean, pantherlike man with cold shallow eyes which glittered like frosted ice. Speed Tolson!

Lee Bedford twisted desperately and threw himself sidewise, thumbing the

[*Turn page*]

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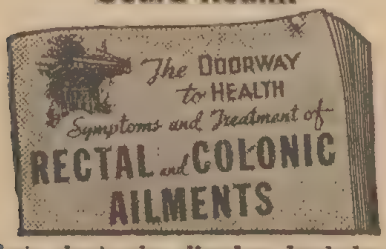

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hammer of one Colt as he did so. The roar of Tolson's gun was drowned in that of his own, but he felt the lead as it scarred his left shoulder.

Again and still again he fired; fired while he was falling, fired after he had struck on his side. He saw the body of the gunman jerk as the searing lead found him, but somehow Tolson kept his feet. The swinging gun was following Bedford's every movement, waiting for that moment when he would become stationary.

Lee Bedford was at a disadvantage. He had never tried shooting with his left hand, but it was now or never. He raised the gun he had picked up and fired at Tolson's face. Speed rocked back on his heels and fell soddenly inside the room.

Swiftly Bedford sprang to his feet, starting for the door. An explosion shook the window-panes and a charge of buckshot swept through the doorway. Lee leaped to the other side of the entrance. Like some horrible nightmare the whole scene lay before him: Cass, wild-eyed and desperate, crouching; the girl, bound to the chair, fear-stricken eyes on her father; Blaine, kicking spasmodically at the end of the rope!

The shotgun steadied. Lee dived, propelling his body across the threshold as close to the floor as he could throw himself. The weapon roared, the charge sweeping over him. He fired both guns at the same time before he had skidded to a stop. Fired them again and again. The right one was empty, but the one of the dead marshal continued to roar. When a futile click told him this, too, was empty, he realized that Sam Cass was down.

There was a butcher knife lying on the floor. Lee seized it, sprang to his feet, and with one desperate swipe severed the rope from which dangled the judge. He caught Blaine as he fell, lowered him to the floor, tore at the rope which had cut off the life-giving air. Nancy had fainted.

For an hour Lee worked desperately with the judge, pumping air into the tortured lungs by means of artificial respiration, then chafing the sluggish blood to-

ward the slowly beating heart. When at last the judge opened his eyes and gasped feebly, Lee placed him on a couch and went to the aid of the girl. Cutting her bonds, he bathed her face and wrists, did everything within his limited knowledge, to bring her back to consciousness.

At last her eyes opened, stark with terror. Lee had one arm beneath her shoulders; he raised her and hugged her close.

"He's all right, honey! Your father's all right!"

SHE couldn't believe it at first. Just lay in his arms sobbing convulsively, trembling, while he whispered soothing words to her and held her tightly. It wasn't until the judge, almost fully recovered, staggered to her side and gently took her from Lee that she believed.

Then Lee Bedford, his task completed, left the room.

He was salvaging his saddle from the dead pony when the posse rode in. They listened to his terse story. Then, while the rest rode ahead, the sheriff dismounted to walk with Lee. Bedford unbuckled his gun belt, sighed, and passed it to the sheriff. That officer looked puzzled.

"I'm your prisoner," said Lee. "I broke my word to the judge."

"Aw, shucks!" growled the sheriff, but finally took the weapon. "That Lingo fella steered us to the horses, which is why we got here so quick. He started back with us, but angled off somewhere."

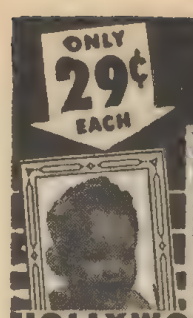
Men carried away the bodies of Cass and Tolson when they reached the house. Lee Bedford lingered at the porch.

"No need for me to go in, is there?" he asked. Parting with Nancy would be so much more difficult.

"There sure is," the sheriff said. "You got to hear what the judge has to say about violating your parole." So Lee Bedford walked in.

The judge was seated in an easy chair and Nancy knelt at his feet holding a hand between both of her own. They looked up as Lee entered, and Nancy, reading what he could not keep from his eyes,

[*Turn page*]



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arose and came swiftly to where he stood. Again she placed her hand on his arm as she had after the trial, but neither spoke a word. They just looked at one another.

"Judge," said the sheriff, "this young fella just turned his gun over to me. Said he'd broke his word and had to go to jail. What will I do with him?"

"Broke his word," said the judge fiercely. "Broke his word! Why, bless my soul, Sheriff, he's lived strictly up to it! I told him never to use his gun except to kill dangerous animals or poisonous reptiles. Cass and Tolson were both! A combination mad wolf and venomous rattlesnake! You give him his gun this minute or I'll hold you in contempt of court!"

"That means I'm free!" said Bedford.

"Free! God bless you, boy, I'd die myself before I'd see you behind the bars. Yes, you're free, and the restrictions are removed. Buy some cattle, settle down—Hm-m-m!" He had just noticed that Lee still held his daughter's hand. "Um—settle down, and if you need any cash—"

"He don't," came a voice from behind them. Cherry Lingo stepped into the room. Lee's money-belt in his hands.

"I found this where Sam Cass hid it," he explained, handing the belt over. "Funny how I stumbled across it, ain't it? Just had a hunch, sort of."

"A hunch, huh?" said the sheriff sharply. "Sure you didn't know where it had been hid? Sure you ain't the third party in that holdup?"

"Me an outlaw?" said Cherry Lingo. "My gosh, no!" He sighed. "I'm too danged soft-hearted to be a outlaw. Well, I'll be drifting along. Glad I met up with you, Lee Bedford."

Lee turned impulsively to him. "Lingo, I owe you more than I can ever repay; and if I aim to settle down in this country, I feel that I sort of need somebody older—with more experience— Aw shucks! What I'm gettin' at is, once you offered me your hand in friendship; I'm wonderin' if you'd do it again?"

"Put her there!" cried the old man, his eyes shining. And Lee Bedford, his own eyes bright, "put her there."

TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 7)

in order to pass through the forest. This most interesting sight of petrified remains of prehistoric trees furnishes more food for thought or study than beauty for the eye. It is government-controled and in the National Monument there are six separate "forests" and innumerable archaeological and geological sites.

The petrified forest is a disappointment to those sightseers who expect to see petrified trees, or trees of stone standing. There are none. All are lying as though they had been chopped down and all branches trimmed off, and the trunks of these trees have broken until they look like they were sawed off in lengths of from four to eight feet. To add to the disappointment, the surrounding rock is of the same brown color as the petrified trees, so at a distance rocks and trees nearly look the same, monotonous and drab.

Entering the forest from either direction, one drives through the entrance which is a cattle guard arrangement in the wire fence, and before entering you are stopped by a government guard and asked if you have any petrified wood in your car. If you do have it must be checked upon before you enter, as it is unlawful to gather any of the wood in the forest for souvenirs.

Such restrictions, which are necessary of course to preserve the forest, naturally make one want to take home at least a small piece of the petrified wood from the great petrified forest, and as one leaves through the other entrance or exit, he is again stopped by a guard and asked if he has any of the petrified wood in his possession, and if one looks suspicious one is searched.

Wood for Sale

By this time the craving for just a tiny piece of petrified wood as a souvenir is whetted, but immediately after you have cleared the entrance or exit, especially if you are going from west to east, you have your chance. A rancher owns quite a ranch right next to the National Monument, and raises, or possesses, more petrified wood than cattle. It is found on his ranch and he has a whole yard full of it in bin-like counters and priced anywhere from 5 cents to five dol-

[*Turn page*]

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lars, according to size. After that there are a dozen places where you can buy pieces of petrified wood and some places it is free, or nearly free, as they give a small piece of the wood with each purchase of their regular wares at some of the roadside stands.

I think that the greatest item in the disappointment of many who visit the petrified forest is in the name. When one thinks of a forest, there is naturally a mental picture of standing trees. The petrified forest in no way resembles a forest, it is claimed and looks like it might have once been the bed of a great sea or ocean. Of course there are hills, but there of course the sea was not as deep as in the bed, which still resembles the bed of a dried up and parched lake bed.

The petrified forest was not the first petrified wood I had seen. When I was a small kid down in Texas there used to be quite a bit of petrified wood in Anderson County, but in passing through the great petrified forest of Arizona, I, like others perhaps, had a great desire to take home a small souvenir.

There were times when we were a couple of miles or more from any other sightseers, or the guards, when I could have purloined a small piece of the wood for the much wanted souvenir. We won't claim that we were too honest to do this, so naturally you are bound to guess that we were afraid.

A Remarkable Fireplace

Immediately after leaving the exit of the forest and coming to the rancher's yard pile of petrified wood and finding that it was for sale, I bought a couple of pieces.

Now I was fixed, I had my souvenirs to show my friends back home. Then on the trip homeward we drove by Ardmore, Oklahoma, to visit some friends for a couple of days and upon entering their home I took the second look at the fireplace and behold, here was a great fireplace faced with petrified wood, and underneath the picture window of the living room there was a great big flower box faced or inlaid with petrified wood, and I asked where he obtained the petrified wood and he told me about ten miles from Ardmore, on a friend's ranch and he had bought a whole tree trunk for $10.00.

But still, I can show my little samples of petrified wood from the petrified forest of Arizona, and I am glad I saw the forest anyway.

Driving north on the forest highway 63

after leaving the east exit of the forest, it is just a few miles to Highway 66, and there instead of turning east on 66 one can cross 66 and will immediately be on the park road of the Painted Desert. This four mile loop road takes one right along the edge of the Painted Desert and brings one back to highway 66 about three miles east of where it was crossed. This road runs right along a short portion of the edge of the desert and it is really not necessary to leave 66 at all in order to get a good view of the desert, but of course more of it can be seen in the longer drive along the edge on the park road.

What a sight is that Painted Desert, bewildering, gorgeous, but instead of being a flat desert as one might imagine, it is a series of gullies, canyons and cliffs. It is the coloring of the formation that gives it the name of "painted" and it is really an inspiring sight. I was told that it is most beautiful after a rain when the sun is setting, but of course one might have to wait a long time to catch it right after a rain. I never heard any tourist say that they were disappointed in seeing the Painted Desert and to me it is a never-to-be-forgotten sight.

It is remarkable that the Painted Desert, with its thousands of acres of hills and valleys and gullies and mounts—a kaleidoscope of changing colors, fascinating and intriguing —is yet the Indian badlands defying human habitation.

Stopover Spot

The geographical location of Winslow, Arizona, and the fact that it is what might be termed a hub to so many points of interest, together with the friendliness of its citizens and its Chamber of Commerce, which has plenty on the ball, makes it one of the favorites for stopovers of sightseers.

This enterprising Chamber of Commerce, realizing that their city gets much revenue from tourists who stop over to visit the many sights of that section of the country, offers and gives every courtesy to travelers. They print and distribute a dozen or more different pictorial folders which they give to tourists, and the copywriter of one of them in particular must have been a former circus press agent, judging from the blurb about the little city which reads: "As warm as the rich hues of the Painted Desert, that will be your welcome in Winslow, the Meteor City."

[*Turn page*]

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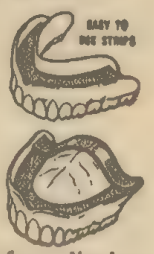

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Flanked by the greatest stand of Ponderosa Pine in America, served by the trail-blazing Santa Fe Railroad, blessed by the health-giving, sparkling air of the great Southwest, linked to the past by colorful Indians and majestic phenomena of nature, Winslow is proud and happy to share its pride.

To the nation and the world it beckons with ribbons of steel and concrete, with shining shafts of air travel. It sounds the call. Here is the hub of northeastern Arizona. Here is the land of the past, here is the wonder of the present, here is the glory of the future.

Points of Interest

Points of interest and their distance from Winslow are listed. Some of them are Polacca (Hopi First Mesa) 70 miles, Oraibi (Hopi Third Mesa via Leupp) 80 miles, Mishongnovi (Hopi Second Mesa) 78 miles, Keams Canyon (Via Polacca) 84 miles, Hotevilla, (Via Oraibi) 85 miles, Grand Canyon (south rim) 153 miles, Oak Creek Canyon, 80 miles, Grand Falls of Little Colorado, 48 miles, Petrified Forest, 52 miles, Painted Desert, 59 miles, Meteor Crater, 27 miles, Mogollon Rim, 59 miles, Montezuma Castle, 168 miles, Canyon de Chelly, 165 miles, Walnut Canyon, 51 miles and Sunset Crater, 60 miles.

The citizens of Winslow are preparing to build an immense Indian Village, a kind of Indian Exposition that will be in operation during the tourist season and will show the Hopi and Navajo Indians at work and at play with their tribal ceremonial dances, including the great Snake Dance, for which the Hopis are famous.

In Winslow, I was naturally attracted to the largest trading post in that section of the country. It was founded in 1877 and is said to be the oldest continuous business operation in Arizona. There are all kind of Indian wares, jewelry galore, more Navajo rugs and blankets than I had ever seen at one time including one immense rug 30 x 40 feet.

Indian Chief

There were a number of Indians present, some selling their wares, some just loafing. I was introduced to one old Indian called Chief something or other, but I did not know how to spell it, did not write it down, and so forgot it. However I was much interested

in this character. He looked to be about 75 years old, but was as straight as an arrow, with black piercing eyes that seemed to see and understand everything, yet his expression never changed. When I was introduced to him, he simply said "How" and all through the conversation with the proprietor and myself this Indian listened, or seemed to be listening, but his expression never changed. Yet I would have been willing to bet that he never missed a word of that conversation, and if our views on certain subjects were not the same as his he never betrayed it.

The proprietor of this trading post is Lorenzo Hubbell. He knows the whole country, the Indians, and many swell yarns of that section of the country. He mapped out a 300 mile trip for me, an out-of-the-way trip over dirt roads to places that the average tourists seldom go, but if Lorenzo Hubbell maps this trip for you, you want to be sure your car is in good mechanical order and that you have plenty of water and gasoline, as there is but one filling station on the entire 300 mile route and no garage at all.

About the only human beings you will see on the trip are what might be termed backwoods Navajo and Hopi Indians, who seldom get to town, and they are no good with a broken down automobile. So, waddies, there are plenty of sights along our modern trails of today.

See America First. *Adios.*

—FOGHORN CLANCY.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

"RICHEST hombres in Wagon Gap! That's what we'll be," land speculator Karl Brazee told his partner in crime, Randy Estes. He meant it, too. Brazee wasn't a man to make idle boasts, nor to start a project that he didn't intend to drive through. And with the railroad coming to the old cowtown, he saw a chance for a million dollar swindle that would mop up whatever advantage might accrue to local ranchers and business men from the coming of the rails and leave his own greedy pockets heavily silted with the gold.

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[*Turn page*]

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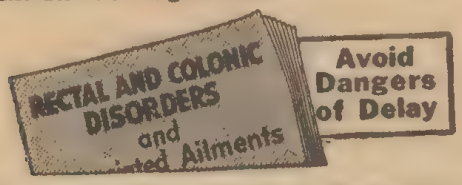

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That's the main course, but there will be other exceptional fiction-food such as a story, SHERIFFING IS A GIFT by a writer who writes from his heart of the heart of the West, Barry Scobee. It is about one Deputy Sheriff Hilo Beesum and a situation in which the setting of a fence down Crooked Creek draw almost gets him killed, not to mention such minor matters as the loss of his job. This one has the genuine cow-country flavor.

Look forward to your copy of the next MASKED RIDER WESTERN!

MAIL CALL

THERE in an endless and ever increasing interest in the history of the old West as evidenced by the following letter from a MASKED RIDER fan. It is amazing how much Western writers know about detail. The story is told of Clarence E. Mulford, the creator of Hopalong Cassidy, that on one trip West he set out with a guide to explore the site of old Fort Benton under the auspices of a professional guide.

Once they got to the neighborhood of the place, the guide couldn't find it and Mr. Mulford from the intricate assembly of material in his mind deposited there by his avid reading of history, was able to locate and trace out the exact outlines of the old fort that the Senator had blown up with barrels of powder in anger at the government for refusing to continue backing for his trading ventures.

Just finished reading the last MASKED RIDER WESTERN. Enjoyed the TRAIL TALKS by Fog-

horn Clancy. His story about the Pecos River bridge was very interesting, as it has been my good fortune to have been one of the lucky persons to have crossed it many times. The conductor on the train always told you about it as you were crossing it—and it was a grand sight to look down on the Pecos River from the car windows. I'm glad I have post card pictures of the bridge canyon and also of Roy Bean's "Court of Justice."

There's another story I'd like to see Foghorn Clancy write up and have printed. It is about Fort Davis, now almost in ruins, or was in 1939 when I was last there. There was some of the old hospital still standing, also some of the officers quarters with their names still on markers in the front yard.

But the highlight of the place is the grave of an Indian girl—she warned the garrison of an Indian attack and was killed by her own people. Her grave is there at Fort Davis.

It would make an interesting story and one thousands of people would enjoy reading. I can't recall at the present the name of the town near Fort Davis, but it isn't too far from Marfa or Alpine, Texas.

I'm a steady reader of the MASKED RIDER WESTERN, TEXAS RANGERS, THRILLING RANCH STORIES and several other Western magazines. I love to read about the West as it has been my good fortune to live in a few of the Western states for a short time, in Texas for seventeen years.

I'm writing this letter which I hope to see in MASKED RIDER WESTERN in the near future, and hope through it to contact some one who knows two people I worked with in the summer of 1904 at the Government Engineering Headquarters at Fort Yellowstone in the Yellowstone Park.

Mae Porter was the name of the girl I wish to locate, or someone who knows her. Slim was the boy's name. I never knew his other name. He said, "Just call me Slim." He was about five-feet-eleven inches tall, had light brown hair and blue eyes.

That has been a good many years ago, in fact forty-six years; but I hope I can contact someone who has known one of these persons. If so please write me and I will be more than grateful.—*Daisy (Chaddock) Killman, Vermont, Ill.*

Looks like a long chance, but we hope

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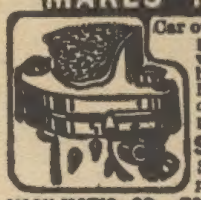

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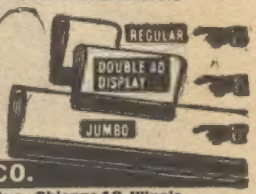

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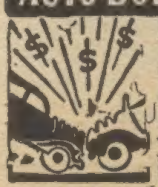

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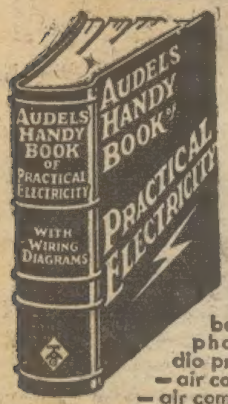

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Daisy Killman has luck. Anyway we thank her for an interesting letter.

I have been reading your MASKED RIDER WESTERN since last fall, and I think it is the best magazine I have read in a long time. Before, I didn't care for Western books, but now I'm reading them as often as I can. I have missed only one issue since I started. That was when I was back home in Saskatchewan.

Keep on with these wonderful books—*Mike Borhen, 10562-102nd St., Edmonton, Alberta.*

Thanks, Mike. We'll keep 'em coming. We often have requests for portraits of famous Western characters that appear in our magazines, and are sorry we can't supply them. I guess the best thing folks like the writer of the letter below can do is tear off covers for pinups.

I like your MASKED RIDER WESTERN very much with the fights of Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk against outlaws. I wait impatiently for each new thrilling adventure of this pair of rangeland knights.

By the way I also would like a portrait of the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk. Looks like I pretty near forgot to mention that one of your best stories was the WOLF OF SPOOK CANYON where Red Badger gets his wolf. Well, *hasta la vista* for now.—*Ray Rantala, 51 McCamus Ave., Kirkland Lake, Ont.*

Here's a reader that brings up a matter that has been mentioned before. THE MASKED RIDER used to wear his flowing cape on every cover. Perhaps it would be appropriate to go back to that. What do some of you other fans think about it?

I enjoy the Wayne Morgan stories very much. But who is the hombre on the cover? If he's Wayne Morgan why the mask and Midnight? Why isn't Blue Hawk's picture on the cover sometimes? I like the stories about Red Badger better than the Ike, Puggy and Shoofly stories. —*Annette Berkinghoff, Nellie Lake, Ont.*

We're afraid that's about all the space there is for letters this issue. Those that didn't get in we'll try to find room for next time. We're always glad to hear from our far-flung MASKED RIDER FANS, and will publish all letters and postcards we possibly can. Meet you next issue with Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk in LAND PIRATES OF WAGON GAP. Meanwhile, address all communications to The Editor, MASKED RIDER WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Thank you! —THE EDITOR.

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